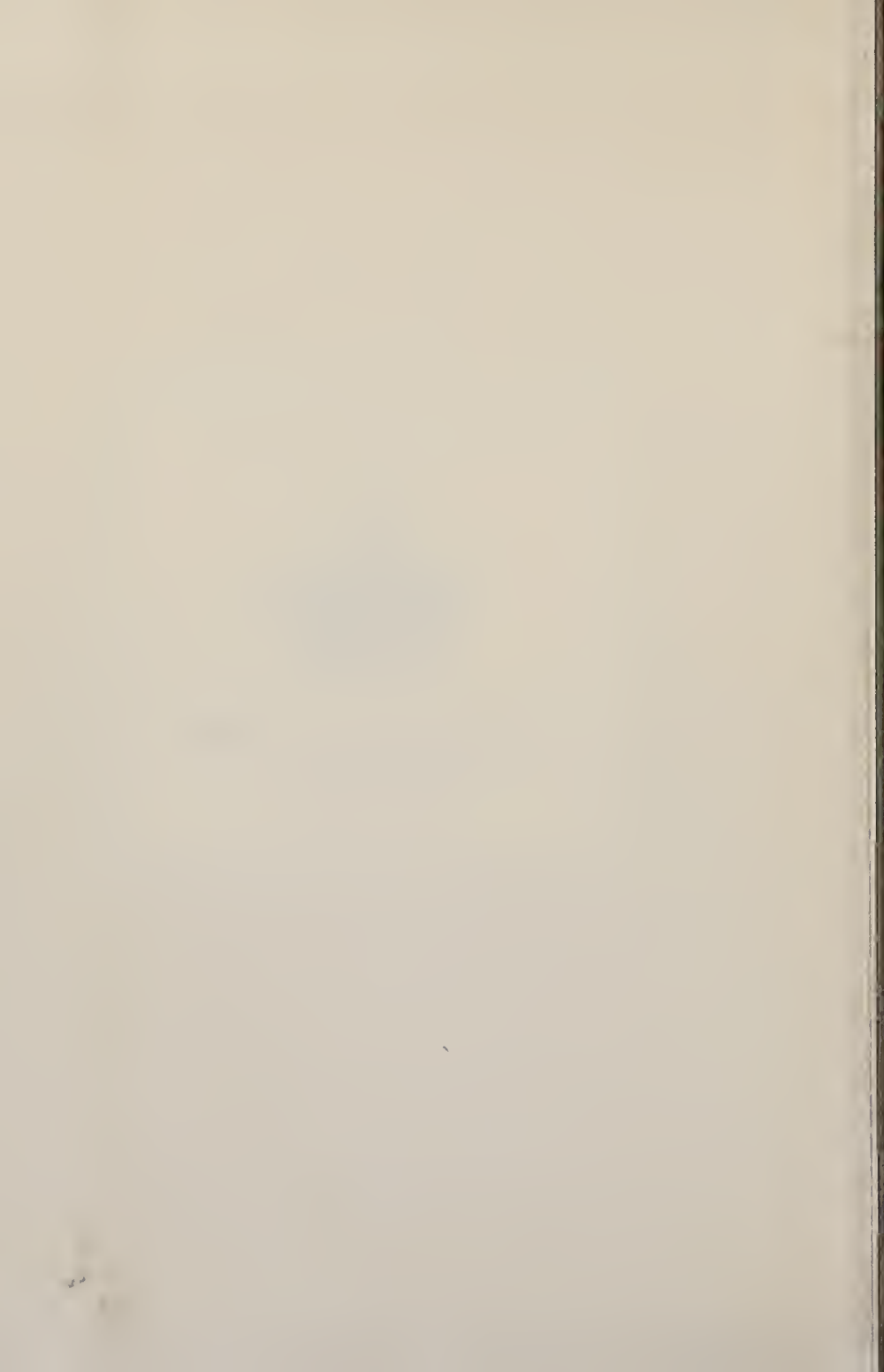


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BLESSED ARE THE RICH

EPISODES in the LIFE of OLIVER SHELDON

BY

JAMES AGATE

LEONARD PARSONS
L O N D O N

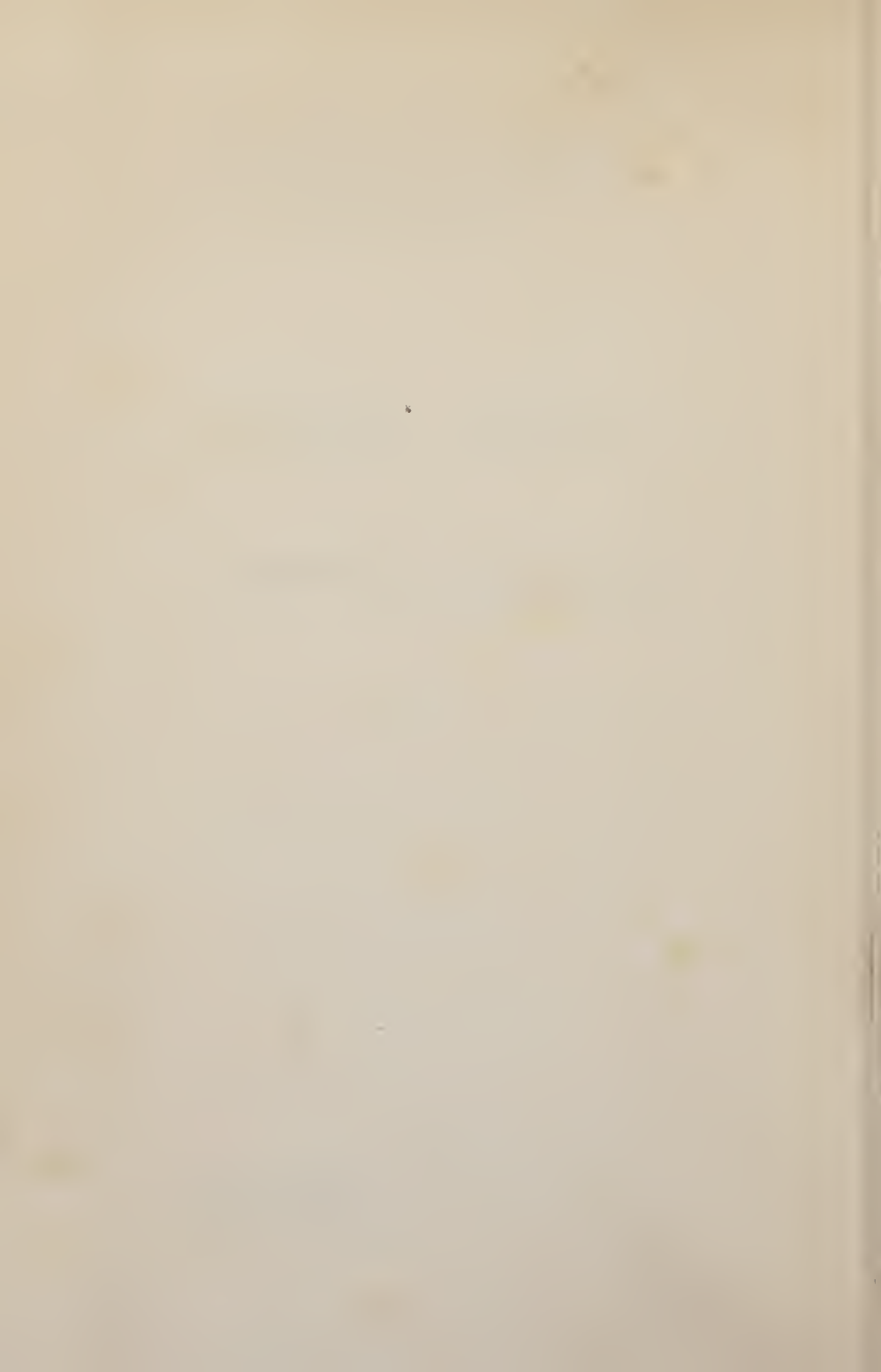
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To the Highbrows, poor dears!

107202



PREFACE

THEY tell me that the picaresque novel
is out of fashion.

This is a picaresque novel.

I feel that way.

J. A.

LONDON,
June 1921-February 1924.

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“*To him that hath shall be given!* This expresses in a perfect phrase the scientific concept fundamental to any real progress in civilized living.”

The American Mercury.

“God is not Don Quixote.”

The Capitalist's Handbook.

“Blast you, Jack ; I'm all right.”

Maxims for Individualists.

BLESSED ARE THE RICH

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR INTRODUCES HIS HERO

OLIVER SHELDON sprang, in 1882, from the loins of a Manchester chemist. It was a commonplace of suburban dinner-parties that "Mr. Sheldon's" had more "tone" than the rival establishment of Old Bates, who, late in life, had taken to dabbling in cameras, photographic requisites, and other new-fangled improprieties. Both shops were some two miles from St. Ann's Square, the hub of Manchester's universe.

John Sheldon had pursued with considerable success that which every Manchester man holds to be the proper business of life—the toiling and moiling to acquire a competence against the time when he shall be too old to enjoy it. This life-long grind is sensible only when it keeps a roof over a widow's head. In the case in which the mother predeceases the father—a boon rarely granted the middle classes—the children

may be trusted not only to reap but to fritter that which has been laboriously sown. Should the money be tied up they will find themselves the possessors of deceitful little parcels illusive of wealth. The economist has not yet arisen to declare that you can be passing poor on forty pounds a year. With a capital of eleven hundred pounds—the sum to which Oliver's fortune had sunk when, ultimately, he set up as a grocer in the Belladonna Road, Paddington, London—you can dabble in stocks or start a gambling den. In Manchester, even, you can rent a cellar and hawk bits of noisome-smelling calico round silly warehouses. You can do eleven hundred things with eleven hundred pounds off your own bat, with none to stop you ; but forty pounds a year, of which you may not touch the principal, is little better than forty fetters. You cannot throw a clerkly chest with a fine "I will do this !" The most you can pretend is a meek "I will do such and such a thing, if somebody will hire me to do it." If you will climb countless stairs to hear the curt "Nothing to-day," if you will bend corrigible neck before sententious grey-beard, if you will daily shake a hundred hands whose touch offends you—if you will submit to these things, you may be allowed to add your undistinguished bowler to the seven, ten or twenty thousand others of that Royal Exchange. If a man be quite certain that there is nothing of the artist in him, there is, perhaps, no better life. But if he have the least of that fatal

taint, better a thousand times be born spinner or weaver. His soul were then his own, his mule and loom his comrades. Clerkship is doom.

Oliver, who deemed himself an artist, had never been compelled to face this matter of drudgery. His father died when the boy was ten years old, leaving a fortune of six thousand pounds, and the shop. There had been an understanding that the assistant,—originally errand boy and plain “Jim,” then “James,” rising to “Young Parkinson” and finally to “Mr. Parkinson”—should one day be admitted to partnership. The details of this had never been settled. Jim, beginning life with a leather satchel on his back from which he learned, with increasing accuracy, to deliver the right bottles of medicine at the right houses, had successfully surmounted each rung of the errand-boy’s ladder. He rose, as a good little Victorian should, on the stepping-stones of his underpaid self to more sufficient things. At an early age he acquired a habit of touching his cap to the carriage-folk of the “Old Road,” wherefore starched ladies were pleased to convey to Mr. Sheldon that his boy was “superior.” From that to fitting the white paper thimbles over the corks of the medicine bottles, tying them with pink string, dabbing on the moistened label (with the palm of the hand, to avoid finger marks), dressing up the whole into a neat smock of white paper with a raised and folded edge convenient for the patient’s name, concluding with a final glory

of sealing-wax and prescription tied like a sash—all this I say, was only a step, yet it was one connoting full experience of shop etiquette, and the nice distinction to be made between customers for whom you placed a stool and those you left to stand. Finally came apprenticeship, examinations and the day when “Young Mr. Parkinson” could be left to make up prescriptions whilst Mr. Sheldon took his after-dinner nap. On the death of the old gentleman the now full-blown “Mr. Parkinson” took over. That is, he “ran” the shop for the widow until her death fourteen years later.

Lucy Sheldon had been a devoted mother, in the strict sense of the words. She had given up, after her husband’s death, all but a fractional part of her income to the education of her child, for whom she intended a handsomer fate than that of shopkeeper, even though the shop to be kept were a chemist’s. What, in cash, it cost this mother to take the boy away from Mr. Prosser’s, and send him to one of the cheaper public schools, was reckonable: the sacrifice during those age-long school-terms was matter for sublimer book-keeping. “Shall I ever be a Prime Minister?” Oliver had asked her on his sixth birthday. The poor lady had taken this not as Vanity’s danger signal but as a presage of greatness to come; and she gave her all to the paving of the way to future greatness. Lucy Sheldon was a lady in the Victorian acceptance of that word. How she came to

marry a chemist forms no part of my story. Perhaps because John Sheldon's outlook was not bounded by those ecstatic window-jars. Husband and wife were "out of the ordinary."

It may have been some newspaper paragraph to the effect that statesmen are necessarily fluent masters of French which finally determined Lucy to send the boy to Paris for the two last years of his schooling. Oh, the parting! Lucy's income not "running to" either of the Universities, she did not reckon Latin of much account. Besides, greatly to her astonishment, Oliver had failed to win a scholarship. So to France he went, exchanging families with the only son of a retired silk merchant of Lyons, who, owning a little property at Villiers-sur-Marne, spent the summer tending his kitchen-garden and the winter at the Comédie Française, taking Master Oliver with him. The English adventures of Louis Pégoud, also aged nineteen, in pursuit of what the Germans call the ideal, and the more matter-of-fact French *une petite amie*, do not call for description here. They demanded considerable tact and forbearance on the part of Oliver's mother, who was too sensible a woman, however, to attempt to reform the morals of a nation in the person of a temporary emigrant. Louis had what was called a job in the office of a silk manufacturer; Mrs. Sheldon provided him with reasonable distractions at home, good plain cooking, and equally wholesome conversation. Sen-

sible woman that she was, she did not worry too greatly over the possible pranks of her son in Paris, that City of darkness—Mancunianly considered.

But there had been no need of lies. Thanks to Oliver's natural timidity, he had run no moral risks. When, at the age of twenty-one, he returned home for good, he knew nothing of life but everything of . . . Balzac! Him he knew from green cover to green cover. He was familiar with the last intrigues of the vast family, had equally your collector's interest in that wearisome piece of stained glass, Madame de Mortsauf, and that delicate minx, Diane de Maufrigneuse, whose tale of lovers he would rehearse as it were a Litany. He knew the attitude which, in 1840, one took up towards the wife of one's patron; the tone one adopted towards a *lorette*, a *rat de l'Opéra*, or ballet-dancer, a *marchande à la toilette*, or rat's alleged parent, your moneylender, shady solicitor, genius and scamp. He knew the thoughts which passed in the mind of that old maid Rose Cormon, when she made the bed and smoothed the sheets for the Vicomte de Troisville. He knew the shape of the ear-rings worn by the Chevalier de Valois, exactly at what period in *La Cousine Bette* Crevel was at his second or third manner, the rôle in that novel played by Bette herself, the figure of the total indebtedness of Maximc de Trailles, the tricks employed by him to keep his creditors at bay, and the oversight which allowed him to pay Cérizet. He

knew by heart the mystifications of Bixiou, and the *bêtises* of the incomparable Thuillier.

Thus furnished, Oliver returned to Manchester, and conceived a belated, protective affection for his mother, and a considerable distaste for Mr. Parkinson and the shop of which that gentleman was the central ornament. Put to it, he would have found it difficult to say which of the assistant's virtues was the most repugnant. He disliked them "in the round." Mr. Parkinson reminded him of a certain left-hand page of the Frenchman in which maiden merit had been minutely inventoried, and a corresponding right-hand page which had begun : "*Cette sottie fille. . .*"

Oliver returned from Paris on his twenty-first birthday, irksomely pure in body, agreeably corrupt in mind. During the next three years he looked eagerly about him, compiling, in what he jokingly styled his *œuvres de jeunesse*, a repertory of the good folk of the North. It is perhaps needless to say that, transferred to paper, these figments bore singular resemblance to certain Parisians. It was no care-worn family doctor who in that brougham jogged from villa to villa, but a coquette hurrying to some suspect hotel. Fired by the paper-making exploits of the Séchards and the cosmetics of César Birotteau, Oliver constructed an entire romance out of a rearranged Dr. Gregory's Powder. Preposterous characters lay to hand in every suburb. Who better than Hypatia, widow of the Reverend Stephen

Fane, late Rector of St. Chrysogonus's, ostentatiously "at home" first and third Wednesdays to the wives of householders paying a minimum rental of fifty pounds a year? Hypatia talked of her "afternoons" as though they constituted a *salon*; she had literary leanings which it would have been more accurate to call aversions. *The Story of an African Farm* was "unwomanly," *The Yellow Book* "fast." She would have used the more sinister "decadent," but for the trifle of uncertainty as to pronunciation. About Mrs. Humphry Ward she ignobly hedged. A "spiritual force" which, at every manifestation, was reviewed in the *National Conscience* at two columns' length, was obviously not to be ignored. On the other hand the late Vicar had been heard to call *Robert Elsmere* subversive. So Hypatia took refuge in *Marcella* and *David Grieve*, both of which she pronounced "deep." Thick as these masterpieces lie upon my page, they were not less crowded in the mouths of the two doctors', three lawyers' and half-a-dozen merchants' wives, who made up local "society." Last place went naturally to the curate's helpmeet, who knew that place to a nicety, helped with the bread and butter, took out her knitting and maintained a tactful silence. There were occasionally great days when Lady Briggs-Billington would condescend upon the fluttered dovecote. Her ladyship, in the unremembered time before her marriage, was plain Cissie Miggs of Hoxton, the daughter of a billiard-marker

and a lady's-maid. It was not Cissie but Angélique d'Asperges of the Théâtre de la Tour Eiffel, who had turned Briggs-Billington's head. Attention may be drawn here to the favourite device of these ephemera of the boards. The farthing-dip of a London chorus will appear upon the Paris stage as "the incomparable English *diseuse* from the Jubilee Theatre." After a season or two in Paris she is back again at the Jubilee, and now bursts upon London's gaze as the celebrated *danseuse* from the Tour Eiffel. As a *diseuse* she cannot hope to succeed here ; we know our Whitechapel when we hear it. Legs will serve her need, and an astute press-agency sees to it that our sober English heads are turned almost before the bill-sticker has finished pasting up those nether virtuositities. The time to fumble in his satchel for the bust, and the minx is a West End celebrity. Cissie's career was short and eminently satisfactory. The fourth row at the Jubilee, then the lead at the Tour Eiffel ; an interim when her acting was confined to the simulation of affection for old Strawbottle ; that nobleman's relaunching of her at the Jubilee, and his fatal seizure in her admirable arms ; his ungrateful will in which Cissie was not mentioned ; and last, her very real liking for Briggs-Billington, who had succumbed to her Principal Boy in the Manchester Pantomime of 19—.

Moody in the morning when he was sober, amiable in the afternoon when he was drunk, her William

“took some managing.” Twice the tying of the knot was frustrated owing to a recurrence of sobriety. The third time Cissie caught her lover “on the top of the wave,” as his cronies said, and landed him triumphantly before the Registrar. To do her justice, Cissie—now blossomed into Cecilia—treated the poor cotton-spinner with perfect kindness, allowing him to do exactly as his more jocund instincts dictated. She saved his money for him, and probably prolonged his life by ten years. Cecilia was no fool, behaved herself well in company, possessed, moreover, a kinder tongue and warmer heart than any other member of Hypatia’s *salon*. I shall not describe at length the humiliating result of the attempt Oliver made at her conquest. His essay was as timorous as his conviction was strong that to his rising celebrity—his first novel was on its publisher’s rounds in immaculate type-script, neatly parcelled and tied with pink tape—some such conquest was due. It took place at a “Cinderella” at the Town Hall, and Oliver imagined himself in the Faubourg St. Germain, having “come on” with d’Arthez and de Marsay from “les Italiens.” At the first stammer of his passion, Cecilia smiled, patted his hand and said :

“Mon petit, I married Sir William for love !”

Oliver would have found an intrigue, *ma foi*, a great embarrassment. And, for the rest of the evening he was radiantly happy. He did not dance, preferring to muse upon gold-spectacled merchants laying their ill-

gotten fortunes at the feet of respectable matrons. Governesses, despite their mien, were, in Oliver's manuscript, that night betrayed wholesale. . . .

The amount of paper which our hero blackened during this period,—using a B.B. pencil, the better for rubbing out—was extraordinary. The little stationer at the corner sold his business really well on the strength of a greatly increased turnover in foolscap. Oliver used the night hours for his fits of creation, attired in a dressing-gown, and stimulated by what he pretended were the cups of black coffee authentic to the occasion. Actually he drank tea; coffee made him bilious. The mornings were used for polishing the lava thrown up by the overnight eruption; in the afternoon the young man went about the polite world.

But it must not be thought that Oliver's head was full of nothing but French nonsense. His earliest recollection of his father showed the old gentleman with a violin cuddled under his chin, spectacles on forehead, pouring out his soul to his mother's decorous accompaniment. Raff's *Cavatina* lay about the boy's infancy. Lucy insisted that her son should escort her every Thursday throughout the winter to the classical concerts inaugurated by Charles Hallé. She subscribed for two seats in the gallery of the Free Trade Hall, immediately above and behind the first fiddles. The seats commanded a magnificent view of the conductor's paunch in profile, of the smirk of

prima donnas threading their way between the file of second violins, of the heave of surging bosoms apostrophising Ocean, that mighty monster, of the coat-seams of Polish pianists straining at that twelfth Hungarian rhapsody. At the beginning Oliver found these concerts limitlessly wearisome. Jacob's seven years of service cannot have been longer than that seventh Symphony. And then the oratorios! On these occasions the orchestra would be huddled together at the very edge of the platform. At the base of this cliff the distributors of samphire, agents for Crosse & Blackwell, cogitated still their dreadful trade. Beldams, with the air of thinking upon Miss Ada Crossley tenderly leading them that are with young, ruminated as to whether Minnie, the pretty parlourmaid, was as utterly guileless as she pretended. On rows of forms behind the orchestra sat the choir. Who does not know the serried benches of the choral festival, those semi-evening frocks of utter joylessness—blue-sashed as to the sopranos, pink serving the contraltos—lambs'-wool shawls discarded as their owners rise to bleat that they, like sheep, have gone astray? Who does not know the tentative evening-dress of the tenors and basses, the white cotton gloves reminiscent of those which Mr. Tuckle assured himself garnished the greengrocer's hands before the "swarry" was uncovered? Let not some meticulous reader tell me that Harris's pair was made of wash-leather, or that the

chorus cries to Baal with naked fists. Strict accuracy is not always material. The point is that, in the spirit, these choirmongers wear white cotton gloves. Angels, demons, and what-not are tall and cadaverous, or short, round, and stertorous, blowing like land-Tritons through their wreathed moustaches. They rise above the feminine waves so that only their upper half, like that of the sea-god, is visible ; you divine a dolphin for the rest. They are a fishy crew, wailing not the sea but the desert. You can hear a pin drop as their chorused lamentation ceases upon that truncated " wilder-", and the mourners gather breath to crash out the amputated "-ness."

There was something ludicrous, thought young Oliver, about tenor Mr. Parkinson, manager of a chemist's shop, and bass young Wotherspoon, grocer's assistant, uniting with the females of their kind in passionate reiteration. He came moderately to dislike Handel, and conceived an absolute loathing for Mendelssohn. How the author of the " Ruy Blas " overture and the Midsummer Revels could commit those smug religiosities passed his youthful comprehension. What he perfectly gathered, however, was that the audience looked upon a performance of Elijah as essentially devotional. So, conceivably, cannibals dance round their fires.

A little less dull, perhaps, those evenings when an opera was given in concert performance. The betrayers of Lohengrin and Samson were at least

passable. Forty, they were yet not unthinkable, Elsa, it is true, was seldom virginal, nor would Oliver had been the man to sleep upon Delilah's knees; but that some other fellow might deem these the violet and the strumpet of "double vigour, art and nature" seemed to him a lawful conception. That which was not lawful was the appearance of the throaty gentleman who proclaimed himself—Adam's apple, pince-nez and bald patch at the back of the head—indifferently Lohengrin and Samson. To Oliver spectacles were a fatal anaphrodisiac. A lover wiping from his glasses the dewy mists of passion, a maiden peering through beclouded "rimless"—go to!

Nor had the boy much feeling for the opera fully performed. How weary he became of those haggard chorus - shrews, laying choppy hands on skinny hips, woodenly swaying "in the smoke, in the smo-o-oke"; of the stout gentleman in the yellow tunic, as obviously a conscript hairdresser in the first Act as he was butcher in the last; of Carmen herself, carrying off her middle-aged *gigolo* in Messalinic waddle like a Cheetham Hill Jewess! How he resented those eight-and-thirty static bars in which King Mark, taking Isolda in adultery, clears his throat prior to reciting the history of his life!

Such was young Sheldon's mentality—when, suddenly, his mother died. She left him her modest

fortune of six thousand pounds, now risen by dint of scraping to seven, and the shop. The business on paper was supposed to produce and, in times of epidemic, actually did produce about four pounds a week, after allowing for Mr. Parkinson's salary. This, argued young Oliver, represented a capital value of some four thousand pounds. Mr Parkinson explained that a business is not capital; that "Mr Sheldon's" was worth, at the utmost, a year and a half's purchase, say some three hundred pounds; that he, Parkinson, had no need to buy it, the custom being his already, prepared to follow him down the street to a shop upon which he had long had his eye. The assistant added that Old Bates had offered him a partnership and the hand of his elder daughter, Priscilla. That he was a fool to give a price at all with so advantageous an opening offered, and Sheldon's business ready to drop into his mouth like a ripe plum. That the people from the "Old Road" were buying these new motor-cars, and doing their shopping "in town." That he, personally, had no money, but that an uncle would lend him nine hundred and fifty pounds, neither more nor less, to buy the lease, good will, fixtures (including the bowls of coloured water), stock and book-debts. Parkinson had meant to offer a round thousand but something stand-offish, something which he vaguely classed as "superior" in Oliver's manner, nettled him, and he knocked off fifty pounds "to teach the young cub a lesson." The offer was accepted.

The old, discreet sign was taken down, and a hideous affair with gilt knobs like an ornamental bedstead was erected in its place. Within three months young Parkinson led from the altar to his abode of bliss and pharmaceuticals not Priscilla Bates, that withered stalking-horse, but little Emily Wother-
spoon, the last soprano but one in the back row of the Hallé choir, and sister of the grocer's assistant. The wedding was "solemnized" at St. Chrysogonus's. The bride wore a white frock that would wash, pince-nez and a hat expressive of alien corn bought after an ecstatic rehearsal of Sir Frederick Cowen's *Ruth*. Oliver attended the ceremony in the Church, but not the breakfast, nor yet the reception held after the return of the happy pair from the fortnight's honeymoon at Morecambe Bay, where it rained. The card of invitation to this function intimated that the givers were a Mr. James Parkinson and a lady who had apparently been transfixed by a silver harpoon. At this point, except for a glimpse in the next chapter, the pair disappear from my story. Years afterwards Oliver heard that they had lost innumerable children, and were immensely happy.

CHAPTER II

RELATES HIS CHILDHOOD

THE immediate shock of bereavement is often little felt. That some dear thing which was can no longer be, is a phenomenon to baffle grief.

First came numb days which passed for Oliver like a dream. Then came that one upon which he must dismantle the house. A sale on the premises? Unpardonable desecration! Oliver, in search of some little knick-knack or picture for his bedroom had attended these infamous rites. Now he hated them with unreasoning virulence. There would have to be, for his mother as for those others, that catalogue of

HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE

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RECEPTION AND DINING-ROOM APPOINTMENTS ;

Bedroom Suites and other Furniture ;

Valuable Paintings, Drawings, Prints and Engravings ;

Bronzes, China and Glass.

ALSO

MISCELLANEOUS EFFECTS.

On a miserable afternoon three weeks after the funeral Oliver made a tour of inspection round each dearly loved room.

How could he bear to part with that old-fashioned sideboard of which the doors closed with a gentle "whoosh," remembered from the time when he was key-hole high, and the drawers, he knew without essay, slid noiselessly in and out as on buttered slides? His father had bought everything "good." The right-hand compartment smelled of stale decanters, old briars, ebony and box-wood chessmen, a leather board; the left-hand was redolent of tea-cosy, salt and sugar. Grown-ups do not know the scent of half the things they handle. It is only by dint of crawling that you can nose Axminster from Brussels, and catch olfactory snobbishness in a Wilton pile. Coal, kept in a black scuttle in the recess between the compartments, has not much smell, but a distinctive, gritty taste. It tastes black! Unthinkable that Oliver could consent to such a description as :

"A HANDSOME 5-ft. 2-tier POLISHED MAHOGANY BUFFET SIDEBOARD with panels, borders and capitols, massively carved in figures of men-at-arms, lion and other masks, and mythological and heraldic designs, the raised back having central carving of the death of Hector."

What mythology or what heraldry could hold the

tales the boy had crooned to himself as he followed the lines of the carvings with his fingers? There were times when his father would put down his pipe and take the boy upon his knee, and tell him wonderful things about a sulky man in a tent. At other times he would be told, with a shade of irritation, not to "bother." And this bothering he came to connect with some awful tale of addition. For whenever he "bothered," his mother seemed to be in the middle of a distressing account of how things "mounted up."

With this phenomenon of extraordinary ascent was associated the chink of money. Lucy Sheldon had her own way of doing accounts. She always kept by her a little basket, in which were a number of worn and bulgy purses. Into the mystery of these Oliver was, on his twelfth birthday, initiated. It had been his father's habit at the beginning of each month to draw from the bank a certain sum of money. This Lucy, according to predetermined formula, divided into purses marked Butcher, Baker, Grocer, Wages, Oliver's Pocket-money, "Extras." It was always a lapse into inadequacy on the part of the purse called "Extras" which had led to the boy being told not to bother. An elaborate system of book-keeping formed part of Lucy's peculiar ritual. Each item of expenditure was entered up every evening in one of a series of little books, of which the labelling corresponded with that of the purses. On

the last day of the month, an abstract figure, arrived at by subtracting the sum of these entries from the amount drawn from the bank, was supposed to tally with the total residue at the bottom of the purses. When it actually did tally, the accounts were right. When it didn't they were wrong. But it was rare that the operation took place in this, its simplest form. About the twenty-third of each month Mr. Sheldon would be called to the rescue of a very desperate state of affairs. *There would be no money left in any of the purses*, whilst "Extras" would be full of little slips of paper marked "E. owes Butcher 7/6" or "E. owes Wages 10/-." When the time came that Lucy must see to her budget single-handed there was still the same wrinkling of brows on the twenty-third. Then Oliver would be despatched to the Bank with a small piece of paper, in exchange for which they gave him money. He always presented the cheque to the head teller, who contrived to combine age, gold spectacles and benignancy without looking a fool. Always the old boy would smile at the young one, shake a warning finger and say, "Tell your mother she's a very extravagant woman!" Always Lucy would ask "And how's Mr. Barlow to-day?" and always Oliver would give the message. One afternoon he was surprised to meet the old gentleman coming out of the private door at the side of the shop, and still more astonished that he gave him no greeting. Upstairs he found his mother half

laughing, half crying. "Ridiculous old man!" she was saying to herself.

How much of a dear, dead past lies in the "whoosh" of an old sideboard!

The pictures on the walls, too. How could he catalogue these? His nursery dated from pre-art days, when it was question of dado—not Dada, and the voice of Liberty had not raised her dirge. Waring was not, nor Gillow. Or not so that you noticed them. Proud parents innocently hung pictures to delight the eye of childhood—*Dignity and Impudence*, *Cherry Ripe*, *M'liss*, *Little Miss Muffett*, Christmas Numbers these, rainbow presentments more wonderful than chiaroscuro. What tales Oliver wove about these people, what plots, what ecstasies! One picture annoyed him intensely. It represented a lady, all cardboard-cracked, about to catch a crowing infant a terrific welt in the stomach. Duchess or no duchess, this was a cruel mother. Then there was a picture of a nursemaid called Madonna in a pink bodice, blue skirt and bulging shawl, whose hair was parted very exactly in the centre. In the crook of the arm she held a naked baby, whose hair had obviously not been brushed, and who must surely be very cold. Why did she not tuck him in her shawl? A stupid old gentleman and a superior lady knelt on each side in an attitude inexplicably like dogs in a parlour grate. Two little angels lent over a rail at the bottom

of the picture, which meant nothing whatever to Oliver.

And then there were other curious representations. A fragile lady—she hung over the dining-room mantelpiece—wore an enormous crown surmounting an oval face with neat hair smoothed over the ears, from which depended massive, yet delicate, ear-rings. Her neck and shoulders, which sloped exactly like a hock-bottle, sustained an immense diamond necklace, hanging at the same angle as the little chain and plaque with “brandy” on it round the tall, thin decanter in the right-hand cupboard of the sideboard, where the cigars and chess-men were. Round her waist was an immense girdle of pearls. One gloved hand held a huge lace handkerchief, the size of an antimacassar; the other, ungloved, rested delicately on the ermine lining of an enormous cloak of which none but a royal personage could possibly have supported the weight. A balcony, a column, a lion, a flight of steps and a few carelessly-strewn roses completed this elegant composition. In the centre of the margin beneath the picture a crown and sceptre reposed upon a cushion.

Among the other grown-up pictures were the two “naked ladies.” The one reclined upon the bosom of a nude gentleman floating in the clouds, watched from a shore by two darkling figures. *Francesca da Something*, the minx was called. The other lady was chained to a rock, and, with the elegance of a dancer

in the pantomime, pointed her toe in the direction of a dragon emerging from the sea. She, it appeared, was called *Andromeda*, and the Dragon, Purse-Use. To Oliver's childish mind the picture was symbolical of his mother chained to the rock of extravagance, and menaced by the dragon of "Extras."

Not for an impious catalogue these!

The young man could hardly bear to look into the poky little back room, of which the fire always smoked, insistently called by Mr. Sheldon, "Your mother's boudoir." There was the old cottage Broadwood whose faded ivory keys were still fragrant from his mother's caress. There, too, were the "Canterbury" which held his own painfully-acquired "pieces," the "what-not" for the display of articles of vertu—the ivory St. Bernard with the flask, the alabaster grapes, the chubby little terra-cotta fellow with his pencil poised above a slate. There remained only his father's "sanctum." Little remarkable here, save a portrait of a young man in the uniform of a Volunteer, and an illuminated scroll recording the presentation of a gold pen-and-pencil case; save, too, a series of photographs entitled "Men and Women of the Day," the collecting of which had been Mr. Sheldon's way of keeping "in the swim."

There they hung, cheek by jowl, higgledy-piggledy, somebodies and nobodies, not of the over-lauded 'nineties, but of the still fainter 'eighties. A lean Morley considered with unflattering eye the charms of

Harriett Vernon, columnar, twin-pedestalled, redundant of thigh. Manning gave his right arm to a glum Sarah Grand, his left to "John Oliver Hobbes" simpering in baby-ribbons. Hall Caine, the novelist, in velvet jacket and carefully disarranged tie, confronted his staggered world like a Jupiter nervous of his own thunderbolts. Close to him a curious, inexplicable bunch, wearing the "emancipated" look of that day—a Mrs. Fenwick Miller, stolid as a policeman, a gentlemanly Miss Catherine Locke, a still more mannish Mrs. Massingberd, a Mrs. Mannington Coffyn. All the photographs were labelled "Permanent." (What has happened to these Permanent Ones?) Somebody, too, called "Belle Cole." Miss Cole? Mrs. Cole? *Madame* Cole, for a guinea! Fortune-teller? Concert-singer? Oliver saw her in red velvet, mounting platform-steps to rumble forth oratorio. Indisputably the king of this grave company, of a respectability to consolidate the spheres, was the Rt. Hon. A. J. Mundella! What this sage had accomplished was no matter for a prying child. He had been, and that sufficed. Mundella-ishness stood for all our young hero prayed most devoutly that he might not become.

As Oliver sat on his school play-box in his now intolerable bedroom, he began to muse on past things. On his first "semi-dress" suit, evening as to the low-cut waistcoat, morning as to the jacket, of which the lapels, throw them back as you might,

would cut into that noble area of starch. On the difficulty of getting his shirt-fronts to assume that board-like stiffness. Home-made, and of the finest linen, but with insufficient backing of cotton calico, they would bulge and retreat, leaving hollows of irremediable vexation. Stuffing with pocket handkerchiefs was never really successful.

Our hero recalled his earliest passion. How, one golden afternoon in his ninth year, he had picked up a *Lillywhite's Cricketer's Companion for 1882*, the year of his birth. Little to-day import the families of Studd and Grace and Thornton to a generation aitch-enamoured of Hobbs, Hendren and Hitch. Lancashire, Oliver's very own Lancashire, had, in the year therein recorded, been champion county, with ten victories and three draws out of thirteen matches played.

Hated Yorkshire—hate is born in a small partisan's mind in a single afternoon between dinner and tea—had been defeated twice, by fifty runs and eight wickets. Hornby had dismissed Ulyett “by a marvellous *one-handed* catch in the long field.” Agile as a monkey, in each of the two matches against Derbyshire the great cricketer and noble captain had made more runs off his own bat in one innings than the entire opposing eleven had compiled in two. Was he not entitled to run-out that old slow-coach, Barlow, when it so pleased him? Had not “A. N.” been champion batsman of the year? Oliver recalled the day when his father had first taken him to

a County Match, Lancashire *v.* Surrey. A little, little man, one Abel, gave the Lancashire bowling what Mr. Sheldon, whose birthplace had been Dorking, heartsomely described as a "rare pasting." You, reader, who remember what your mind was like at eight years old, will not be surprised to hear that Oliver firmly expected a Lancashire Cain to do the same, and more also, unto the Surrey bowlers. In this connection let me recall Oliver's first knicker-bocker suit. The tailor's name happened to be Macbeth, and the fitter was a masterful woman with punishing hands, and a forbidding mouth.

"Is that Lady Macbeth, Mummy?" he had asked.

That first day's cricket inaugurated an obsession. Every summer afternoon at four o'clock precisely, a newsboy would leave a copy of the fourth edition of the evening paper. Oliver, home from school, would hang about the shop, take the paper from the boy and carry it, folded, into the sitting-room. At five o'clock it would be opened and perused by his father. After tea Oliver was at liberty to slake his burning anxiety. Never did he peep, and not once did he ask his father the burning question. Shyly he struck up a friendship with the newsboy. This genial Mereury of the bright-red hair and naked, padding feet would whisper the score as he handed Oliver the paper. One day he came no more, and his successor was eloquent only of the names of race-horses. . . . The week-end was a time of

immortal longing. In those days no Sunday paper might poison the genteel home. Two wickets in hand late on Saturday afternoon — say against Yorkshire — and seventeen runs to get! What agony had Tantalus to compare with this boy's suspense?

Then came the day when his father measured off an eighteen yard pitch on the tiny patch of back lawn, with a pear tree at cover-point, a thorn at mid-on. The wall of the tool-house kept wicket. Oliver recalled the stumps of shining yellow, the bails that had to be cut in two, the plum-coloured ball, the bat, that ravishing bride of a boy!

“Play forward,” his father would say, “whenever you can. Remember this, throughout life, Nolly, that no man need be ashamed of getting out through playing forward.”

And then the old gentleman would tempt the boy with a deeeitful break-back, and ehuekle at the rattle of the stumps.

Of one recollection Oliver was ever ashamed. On summer evenings little Jerry Hanmer, the son of the doctor across the way and Oliver's junior by a year, would come in for a match—Mr. Sheldon and Ground *v.* the Boys. (They had no idea what “and Ground” meant, but Oliver had read it in the paper and it sounded well.) One evening during an epidemic of scarlet fever, when Mr. Sheldon was obliged to stay in the shop, Oliver bowled to Jerry,

and failing to bowl him out in reasonable time, impatiently threw the ball at his friend. It was the work of a second to rush down the pitch, fling his arms round the body of his chum, kiss and fondle and cry him back to consciousness—he had not really fainted—and then half drag, half carry him into the kitchen to have the forehead bathed and dabbed with arnica.

“How did it happen?” was Lucy’s first query.

“Fell against de wall,” sobbed Jerry, who was master of his small soul, if not of his linguals.

When his mother went “through” into the shop, to procure a further supply of medicaments, Oliver sidled up to Jerry and made offering of a cherished sixpence.

But Jerry pushed his hand away.

Lucy, herself, took the boy home.

Followed Oliver’s uneasy supper, the sudden fit of tears, the confession, the visit to Dr. Hanmer’s, the second rehearsal of penitence, the sight of Jerry with a white bandage sleeping reassuringly, a second supper at the Doctor’s.

On wet days there was indoor cricket. Opening a book at random the children spelled out the letters, which represented according to a predetermined code a hit or a disaster. Thus *a* to *d* indicated singles and *e* to *h* fours, *i* to *o* threes, *y* a six, and the remainder twos. *T* was “bowled” and *w* “caught.” *P*, they felt instinctively, had to mean “stumped,” while *k*,

equally obviously, was "leg before." *X* and *z* served for the fellows who obstructed the field or handled the ball. Say the match was "England v. Australia." Oliver—England, by virtue of elder right—would open the batting with "W. G." and Shrewsbury, and score to each batsman in turn according to Jerry's spelling. The Old Man would take first knock and the game would begin at, say :

. . . the endearing elegance of female friendship.

At once catastrophe ! *T*, and Spofforth finds W. G.'s stumps first ball ! One for none. Noll and Jerry exchange wild surmises, flabbergasted upon the hearthrug. Now W. W. Read joins Shrewsbury, who opens the score with a boundary hit. Read follows suit and both settle down to a fine forcing display. The professional is the first to reach his fifty, and it is he, too, who sends up the hundred. Then Palmer, coming on for an over before lunch, with his first ball deceives the Notts. crack, who, playing forward, misses the break and lifts his toe. In an instant (*p*) Blackham has whipped off the bails. Two for 109—Read not out 54. The boys go to their rice-pudding confident that England has made a good start.

Wet, indeed, it had to be to put a stop to real cricket, and not the weather but Mrs. Sheldon was the danger. There's a special fun in trundling a sneak along the wet grass, the water spurting from it

in multiple parabolas. There's fun in the slimy touch of the ball, in getting your feet "wringing." Boys know delight in all sorts of things that grown-ups scorn. What sophisticated odour can vie with the hot, damp smell of wicket-keeping gloves? What grown warrior wears his greaves,—field-boots in our poverty-stricken, modern style—with half the satisfaction with which Oliver donned his first skeleton pads.

SKELETON PADS !

I pity the reader who has known this luxury from birth, and remembers not that shining change from the complete mattress to the armour of the fascinating chinks.

Once the boy made a hundred runs, his father, usually a safe catch, unaccountably buttering a simple return with the score at ninety-five. That night, when parents were asleep, Oliver crept downstairs, fumbled his way to the garden and kissed the pitch. A sentimentalist, you say? Well, if there's anything in religion, God's a sentimentalist, too. Unfortunately the boy forgot to wipe his feet and climbed into bed again all dewy and be-grassed. Morning explanations attendant upon the state of bed-clothes were cut short by a sneeze and subsequent attack of pneumonia.

Oliver pulled through. So do not all sentimentalists.

Later recollections there were, after the return

from Paris, recollections of Easter trips to the Lakes, summer holidays in Wales, odd days at Blackpool. Of the first bicycle. Of DROPPED HANDLES ! How rare the pungency of that cycling-suit in Harris tweed ! How good those last spent miles, eyes smarting, neck blistered, hands scorched on the sweat-pearled bars. Even more romantic the battle when, with sogging knees and wet creeping up their sleeves, Oliver and Jerry would spread their capes to the weather, and feel the chain under their feet crunch and tighten. What delight to tumble into a bath and fall asleep over supper ! Of Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Westmoreland they came to know every cycleable inch. To dismount for a hill less than one in three were unutterable disgrace. The long grind up Pately Bridge, the heart-breaking ascent from Peak Forest to the Grouse Inn where, leaning shoulder to wall and still on saddle, they drank great pints of shandygaff before beginning that delirious "spring running" along sun-glintoned roads the colour of apple pie drenched with cream, the swift assault of Cemetery Hill at Ambleside, whereat the temples beat like a thousand Queen's Hall Orchestras—the impotent, legless motorist, rushing from hotel to hotel, knows nothing of this.

Of the inner economy of bicycles Oliver was ignorant. A puncture brought him, metaphorically, to his knees. Something, he knew not what, had to be done with a bucket of water. A vague sub-

stance called "solution" was then brought into play, and finally you sand-papered something or other. He had watched them at the bicycle shop, and in theory these things seemed feasible. But when a road-performance was called for he was done. As for adjusting the back wheel, a safe plan seemed to be to hit the tyre with the coal-hammer. If not much good ensued, at least no definite harm was done. Somehow Oliver's machines proved of feeble endurance. Yet when he sold or exchanged them, which happened about once a year, he was invariably astonished at the recuperative powers they showed in the hands of stupid shop-boys and unintelligent clerks. Now Jerry could make the poorest of second-hand affairs last him ten years. Jerry was to be a success in life. With Jerry on the big excursions Oliver felt quite safe.

The boys had gone to the same schools, Oliver always a year in front of his friend. First to Miss Knibbit's, then to Mr. Prosser's and last, gloriously, to Eversfield. Oliver's forte was Speech Days, Jerry's the playing fields. Oliver would take home with him such monstrosities of prize-giving as Darwin's *Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*, Schiller's even less readable *Geschichte des Abfalls der Niederlande*, Taine's authoritative—for those who submit themselves thereto—*Les Origines de la France Contemporaine*. Intellect, as was only to be expected, thus brought about its own magnificently-bound

punishment. Whereas Jerry would go back with a cricket bat also magnificently bound, plus a claret-coloured cap with gold tassels. Life at Eversfield had been singularly unlike anything your puling novelist has described. It had just been decent. True that there had been one or two romantic attachments, that the Head had issued an edict forbidding the fags to decorate their seniors' studies with the flowers gathered on Sunday afternoon walks,—“a practice altogether too Greek.” But school-life, on the whole, had been decent.

When the older boy went to France Jerry remained to lead the school eleven to victory and the fifteen to defeat. Eversfield were not good at football. By this time Jerry's calves were the admiration of the whole school, with the exception of the more spiritual Sixth; and if ever Oliver throughout his life was jealous of his friend, muscular development was the cause.

Curiously enough, in Oliver's last term, Jerry beat him for the Foundation Prize for the Best English Essay. The choice of themes was rich: (a) The characters in the Satanic Council as drawn by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, Book II.: (b) The influence of the Telephone on Social Life: (c) The growth of the “professional” element in national sport: (d) “For a crowd is not company; and faces are but as a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love.”

Now Jerry was no fool, and knew that with his

athletic prowess he would be expected to choose (c). It was the easiest subject, and the one upon which all but the intellectual mugwumps of the Sixth would fasten. So he chose the last, and startled the examiners into awarding him first prize. Oliver, nobly tackling his Satanic Majesty, began with a brilliant "The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman. The princes of commercial darkness are cads." And so on to an arraignment of the Councils of Satanic Wealth about which Milton took care to be silent. It is as great a mistake for a schoolboy to indulge in Socialism as for a grown man with less than an assured position and ten thousand a year. The prize, as I have said, went to Jerry. Years later his final firework—"Love of a good man for the woman to whom he gives his name beareth all things even unto dishonour, believeth all things save that which would betray her, hopeth all things unto her return to his bosom, endureth all things even unto the finger of scorn—" was pinched by Oliver and used as peroration to his first assault upon popular sympathy in the novel-reading public. I do not know whence Jerry had lifted it.

All this time our hero has been sitting on that old playbox in that now intolerable bedroom, musing and meditating. Idly he took up an old arithmetic. On the fly-leaf was scrawled :

Oliver Sheldon,
The Universe.

At a later date, in a more mature handwriting, the word "c/o God" had been substituted, thus marking the beginnings of metaphysical interest.

Immediately beneath was scribbled the schoolboy teaser :

$$\begin{aligned}
 &\text{To prove } 1 = 2 \\
 &\text{Let } a = b \\
 &\therefore ab = b^2 \\
 &ab - a^2 = b^2 - a^2 \\
 &a(b - a) = (b + a)(b - a) \\
 &\therefore a = b + a \\
 &\therefore a = a + a \\
 &\therefore a = 2a \\
 &\therefore 1 = 2.
 \end{aligned}$$

Now where was the catch ?

At this point the catch of his bedroom door was lifted, followed by irruption of a Parkinsonian head and shoulders.

"Come in," said Oliver, politely.

"It's only me," said Mr. Parkinson.

How many people owe their success in life to that catchword of pretended humility ?

"I was thinking, Master Oliver, that if some of your dear mother's bits of furniture don't fetch too much, I might be a bidder. Emmy—Miss Wother-
spoon, I mean—has taken a fancy to one or two things. I took the liberty of showing her round one day when you was out."

"And what the devil has Emmy—Miss Wother-spoon, I mean—to do with my furniture?"

"We're engaged."

"But didn't you tell me you were walking-out, as you call it, with Bates's daughter?"

A malevolent flicker shook the Parkinsonian eyelid.

"We *was* walking-out, Master Oliver, and then one evening I see her talking to young Crabtree a shade too affectionate. So I waits for him. 'What's all this, Crab?' I says. 'What's what?' says he. Well, you know how things happen, Master Oliver, and we had a bit of a dust-up. I downs him, and next day what do I find but Miss Priscilla nursing his black eye, as you might say."

"Well?"

"Well, after that I 'ad no more truck with either of 'em. Then Emmy came along. I'd been a bit sweet on 'er at the choir-practices last winter. And now we're courting. Engaged, in fact. Emmy's taken a liking to the pianner, and there's an escreetwor as 'ud do for my accounts if it don't fetch too much."

Here Oliver cut him short. Throughout his life he never had objection to being fleeced, provided he could "place" the shearer. He had seen the bottom of Mr. Parkinson's mean soul and was satisfied.

"I do not intend that the furniture which my mother treasured shall be debased, Parkinson," he said with a queer little assumption of dignity.

"Oh, no offence, sir," murmured that young man,

shifting uneasily on his feet, and scratching the calf of one leg with the toe of the other.

A pause.

Then Mr. Parkinson shambled out of the room, and out of my story.

It was clearly impossible to connive at such possibilities of degradation. The furniture must be sold, away from the house, in some other town. Destruction would have been preferable.

Canterbury and escritoire remained to be despoiled and their contents sorted. Reverently Oliver turned over the faded music-sheets—"I would that my love," the duet which his mother and father were wont to sing on Sunday evenings, after the hymns; the overtures to *Zampa*, *Semiramide* and *William Tell* arranged for four hands; an elaborate paraphrase of *Norma*. In the writing-desk, over which his mother would bend on winter afternoons and melancholy summer eves, Oliver discovered his first drawing—a cottage window with flower-pot on sill—together with some photographs of a naked little fellow propped up on a white rug against something columnar and Victorian. Then packets of letters in his father's and mother's handwriting, letters of which he was the fruit. Letters, too, in even more faded handwriting.

That which shook Oliver here was not the recognition of his own responsibility, not the awe that these others should be fulfilling themselves in him, but a

sense of the pity and desolation of finished lives, the pathos of closed books.

After a while he kindled a fire in the big dining-room grate and set about his work of destruction methodically, without ruth.

This done he wrote something in his new cheque-book, opened the door, and called gently for his old nurse, the only servant he had ever known. She came with foreboding on her gentle face.

“Nanny dear,” he said, “I’m leaving here. I don’t know what I’m going to do afterwards. Everything in Mummy’s bedroom”—his voice shook a little—“is yours. Also the things in the kitchen. You’ll be able to make a little house for yourself, somewhere, Nanny. And here’s a cheque for a hundred pounds.”

“Oh, Master Oliver, I don’t want to take it, indeed I don’t. Your mother left me out on purpose. She said you would be sure to look after me. And she said that I was to be sure to look after you. And I promised, Master Oliver, I promised.”

I forbear to reproduce the discussion which ensued. It lasted half the afternoon and ended in his mother’s room. Finally Nanny yielded, adamant, however, in one thing.

“Not the pearl brooch, nor the diamond and sapphire rings, Master Oliver, I won’t have those. They’ll be for Master Nolly’s wife some day, your

mother used to say. Oh, my dear, it wasn't long before. . . ."

There was mutual comforting.

"They're real, Master Oliver!"

"Oh, Nanny, what is 'real'?" he cried in desolation. "Now dry your eyes, be a good Nanny, and take this."

He pressed the cheque into her hands. Half to himself he added :

"Quand il n'y en aura plus, il y en aura encore."

"And what does that mean, I should like to know, Master Oliver?" asked Nanny. "You know I don't understand all that foreign talk, though I did learn a bit from that Mr. Pay-goo when he was here, 'Bon swor' and such-like."

"It's a quotation from an old play, Nanny, and means you're always to let me know your address."

When Oliver left the house that evening his trunks were packed, ready to be sent on to his as yet undetermined address. In his pocket were his mother's few trinkets for the "reality" of which he cared nothing, and, carefully bestowed, a single slip of paper found in an empty purse :

"E. owes Nolly's pocket-money 1/9."

It was the one piece of his mother's handwriting which he preserved.

CHAPTER III

AND CONFINES HIMSELF TO NO MAN'S RULES,
WHO EVER LIVED

OLIVER pushed back his dessert-plate and, taking his French novel from its improvised stand, closed it and laid it by the side of his peach-stones. This was the hour for delicate reflection. Zola, he inclined to think, went well enough with food but not with a cigar. Oliver liked the little restaurant, genuinely French, rather out of the heart of things, which attracted polite custom by its cuisine and high charges. The rich German Jews, of whom Manchester society has always been composed, did not mind paying through their noses, which, indeed, were of convenient dimension for this purpose.

Dinner had been good. First there had been *hors d'œuvres*, rejected by Brillat-Savarin's true disciple, but, to Oliver, æsthetically charming. In what seas had not toilers put on their livery of tan that these delicate little fishes might swim their last in china dainty as any shell? Whitebait had followed—there was something Roman about such a holocaust of lives—and then the wee-est lamb

cutlet. Here again he could picture the farmer on some bitter February night ploughing through upland snow to the barn where the sheep lay huddled together. Oliver knew something of this. He had spent a year or so on a Derbyshire farm.

The farm belonged to one John Martin, familiarly known as Jack o' Bob's, because he was Old Bob Martin's son. Old Bob had achieved a senility almost Wordsworthian; our friend had admired immensely the technique of his perfect toothlessness, of scanty locks lending themselves to the evening breeze, of gnarled hands and ossified intelligence. An old rascal he was, whom a poet would have fashioned into an image of serenity, of distant sails and setting sun. Yet one could not but note that he dribbled incessantly, and had apparently lost the power of every natural function. Such vestiges of intelligence as remained showed a mind grasping, cruel, sensual. At the women he still cocked a ghoulisn eye.

"In spite of all your philosophers," Oliver had written to Jerry Hanmer, "there is nothing to be said for old age, which is a loathsome, incredible thing. That this ruin, still drawing painful breath, held by authority to be alive, since it concedes him the power to vote at Parliamentary elections, should once have been a man indeed, with appetites, passions, the means of satisfaction and more besides—love, honour, troops of friends,—this is the kind of thing

which throws doubt upon faith. The last ignominy has been spared the old fellow; happily his mind has kept his body company in the race to the grave; it's level pegging now. He sleeps in the same bed with young Bob, his grandson."

Oliver recalled how Old Bob had died in his sleep, suddenly. Young Bob, waking in the middle of the night to find his grandfather dead, had not thought it necessary to rouse the house.

"Time enough for t'ould chap in't morning!" had been his rosy, pink-cheeked confession. This country youth had no nerves.

Years afterwards, Bob's business being to drive a carrier's motor-van to London, he had invited Oliver to share the trip. The car breaking down and the pair being forced to bivouac by the roadside, they had made themselves comfortable in the interior of the van. As they were dropping off to sleep Oliver became aware of something sinister in the shape of the package upon which he had spread his travelling-rug, and gave a cry of horror.

"Ay, it's a dead 'un, aw reet," Young Bob had said. "But tha's nowt to fear. It smells none, and conna bite!"

Oliver's thoughts went back to Old Bob's funeral which had been conducted with every rite known to the countryside. Cake had been left for the birds at the farm-house door, and offering made to the bees. How yellow the old man had looked in his coffin,

dressed in his Sunday best. Refreshments had been handed across the open coffin. A wine-drop, splashed on the forehead, gleamed like a bull's eye on a jaundiced ground. None had dared to wipe it away.

Surely the most tragical of all human ceremonies is the funeral where the heart is not engaged. Where there is grief there must also be comfort. Ever so little hope lifts mankind over the impossible event, but to watch with undimmed eyes the indifferent bestowal, its grotesqueries, its sombre clown marshalling his attendant drolls, its mourners whose woe sits as inartistically as their ill-fitting clothes,—this is the nadir of human melancholy.

Jack o' Bob's had inherited nothing, since he had taken care to possess himself of his begetter's all some time before his death. He, too, was an ailing man, troubled of worms. He cured his horse, because the loss of a horse meant money; but he would not consult a doctor on his own account, because that, too, meant money. "Ah, old Zola," said Oliver half-aloud, "you didn't know it all!" John Martin's wife dying in childbirth, his household was looked after by an elder sister, who resembled him in every respect, save that for worms we must read incurable cancer. At least John Martin declared it incurable, to avoid calling in advice.

It was with bright-eyed Young Bob that Oliver had gained his knowledge of lambing. Jack o' Bob's being laid up with rheumatism, the son had taken

the lantern to the barn. A queer experience to watch this lad, who should have been at school. . . . He had learned, too, that a pet lamb, a "ca'ed" or cared-for lamb, is a thing to be avoided for economic reasons. Such a one costs too much. Therefore, when a sheep dies in lambing, resort is had to devious devices whereby one who is already a mother can be induced to foster the orphan. Sleight of hand is required here and some confusion of the maternal nose, so that, the two lambs mingling their misty odours, she shall take them both for her own.

After the cutlet. . . .

But hold. Sufficient that dinner had been excellent. A half-bottle of Perrier-Jouet, 1893, followed by a pint of claret, Mouton D'Armailhac of the same year, are enough to put a young man on good terms with himself. Up to a point *L'Assomoir* had gone down very well. There is singular charm in reading about squalor in elegant surroundings, your author beetling it above a sea of pleasant napery, polished glass and shining silver, an obsequious chamberlain at elbow waving commands to menials thinking on nothing but your comfort. Oliver knew very well that they cared only for his tips, but he could always pretend. In such conditions his concern for the future of socialism was at its most benignant, his hopes for its success at their brightest. In the meantime he would harry the breath out of the body of the little page who ran for him to the neighbouring theatre in search of

the choicest stall, salving his conscience with the gift of half-a-crown. Before 1914 young men were much younger than they are now, and could take unashamed delight in the punctilios of head-waitership, the parade of the wine-list, the pyramidal grandeurs of your piled cigar-boxes. Oliver might not recognize on his palate the taste of the wines he summed up for or against, but at least he could roll their styles and titles on his tongue. Knowingly he could shake his head at each cedar shrine as it was offered to him, confident in that ultimate sarcophagus with the name engraved upon the ivory tablet.

“How is it, M. Jean”—he had once asked—“how is it that when there are two of us, you always manage to place the plates so that the dish fits in between them exactly, to a sixteenth of an inch?”

“Monsieur,” the great man had replied, “ou on est artiste, ou on ne l’est pas!” A friendship of some years’ standing existed between the diner and his portly minion.

It had begun in this way. Molière had succeeded Balzac in my hero’s enthusiasm, and to anybody with the vestige of a knowledge of the French tongue he would spout his new-found god. Did M. Jean fail to meet him on arrival, Oliver would say frowningly to some olive-skinned *commis* :—

“Demandez si votre maître est en commodité d’être visible.”

An adapted quotation it had been which had discovered to each the existence, in the other, of a kindred spirit. There was a suspicion of cork in the wine.

“Attachez, M. Jean,” Oliver had said, “attachez un peu sur ce vin la réflexion de votre odorat,” to which M. Jean, with infinite gravity had replied, “M. Mascarille, je n’ai jamais respiré un vin mieux conditionné.”

A staggering feat for a head-waiter, accounted for by the fact that M. Jean had, in early life, gained a first prize for Comedy at the Théâtre Français. Realising that even in a comparatively enlightened country it pays better to minister to men’s stomachs than to their brains, this Frenchman of Polish origin had shaken from his shoes the dust of some very dusty boards, and taken a job as waiter.

This magnifico had a brother, M. Edouard, who acted as chef to the establishment. Both were of a generosity of habit shared only by one other human frame, that of Portwood, Emperor of Mutes to Messrs. Prolicks & Glumm, undertakers.

Portwood (see *Responsibility*) it was who assured a distracted lady that—“in one of our caskets, Madam, you could keep the dear gentleman on the drawing-room mantelpiece for years !”

Portwood it was who, instructed by a solicitor to cremate a departed client desiring his ashes to be scattered on a mountain-top, had thrust his way into the lawyer’s unholy of unholies a day or two after

the performance of the first part of the ceremony. Pulling up his collar, humming with genteel roll an air, twirling with elegant black-gloved gesture the string of a brown-paper package, Portwood it was, and not Micawber, who exclaimed, "We've got the old gentleman into the smallest possible compass!"

Portwood who, when a train bearing a client drew into a station, would solemnly throw away his cigarette, take off his hat, sniff at the brim and form himself into a procession of one. "My corpse, I think?" he would mutter in soliloquy. Portwood! Portwood!

Portwood could make even Death grotesque. Yet Portwood kept Prolicks & Glumm's shares at twenty-two shillings and sixpence when the invasion of Manchester by the monster emporiums had sent every other pound share down to half a sovereign.

The last time Oliver saw Portwood he had retired and was bowling leg-breaks to a golden-haired grandson on the sands at Llanfairfechan. He was an enthusiastic Freemason and, I am informed, trolled an excellent comic song. He plays no part in this history.

"Then why," I hear the impatient reader exclaim, "drag him in at all?"

You, Sir, have struck at the very root of art. Your lady would not have interpellated me so. She is wondering, bless her simplicity, what manner of man

was Portwood in his younger days, before he was appointed Chief Ghoul with six hundred a year *and commission*. She is wondering what manner of woman he married, what the way of their courting, and what the poor girl wore at the wedding. Let me, for her ease, invent a babyish little thing with china-blue eyes and curls like Dora Spenlow's, frightened out of her life at sight of so much death as is contained in a fly at the bottom of a window-pane. Alas that she should die in giving birth to the mother of the little ruffian who has just despatched old Portwood to the leg-boundary knee-high in the surf. What she wore at the wedding? Let me think. Portwood is now nearing eighty. Let your lady look up *The Queen*, *The Lady*, *Mother Weldon* or whatever dressmaking journal was in vogue in the 'sixties, and she shall know what the lower middle-classes wore at their couplings.

To go back to you, Sir, who are so greatly concerned about art, and all that old-fangled rubbish about pattern and selection. Well, I submit me to your rebuke, and come back to my story.

Oliver was meditatively sipping a self-respecting brandy which, the Manchester Licensing Authorities of that day deeming liqueurs to be immoral, was conveyed to him by M. Jean under cover of a coffee-cup. This custom, for all I know, may still prevail. In that enlightened city music on Sunday was ever held for an abomination, games in the parks a com-

mittal direct to hell. Not senators but sheep adorn those bleating council-halls.

“Mes compliments à M. Edouard. Il a très bien fait ce soir !” said Oliver, after paying his bill and leaving a tip exactly ten times that which Strumbach, the German Jew millionaire (see *Responsibility*); would have thought adequate.

“Dites donc ! Jean et Edouard, ça me donne une idée. Vous devriez vous appeler de Reszke.”

“Nous sommes parents, Monsieur !” murmured the astonishing M. Jean.

Yes, that had been a decidedly good dinner, thought our hero as he turned into Oxford Street in search of amusement. The wretched little chasseur, damn him, had not been able to procure a seat anywhere. It was always the same, Saturdays. Of course one could book beforehand, but that did away with the spice of adventure. He revolved in his mind the list of possible entertainments for what remained of this summer evening.

Theatre Royal. Mr. J. Martin Harvey. *The Only Way*. No, decidedly no ! Mr. Harvey was a highly accomplished actor, the only Pelléas the English stage affords, but to be expected to stand at the back of the pit on a hot night in June and endure the tears drawn by Mr. Carton from the young ladies in Messrs. Prolicks & Glumm’s pinking department—this was too much.

Prince’s Theatre. Miss Dolorissima Footle. *The*

Naughty Nautch-Girl. "In Act II Miss Footle will sing her latest hit : Nellie from Nightgown Land."

I think Oliver would sooner have jumped into the Bridgewater Canal, dull though that particular canal may be.

At the Queen's Theatre Napoleon was still divorcing Josephine ; whilst for the Gaiety Repertoire the hour was too late.

At the Free Trade Hall a number of enthusiastic gentlemen calling themselves the Minnehaha Minstrels, whom Oliver strongly suspected of being Bullocks, Rams, Antediluvian Llamas or members of some other quaint brotherhood, were doubtless being very amusing with burnt cork. But our hero felt himself too grown-up for that kind of thing. At the Memorial Hall—what ghostly recollection is exorcised here I have never been able to discover—a ladies' choir was wrestling with the Mendelssohn's "Hymn of Praise."

The better class of music-halls were, of course, hopeless. At the Palace, for Vesta Tilley, there had not been standing-room these two hours and more ; the Hippodrome over the way would be thronged with the overflow baulked of Vesta. Mechanically Oliver turned into the Alexandra Music Hall—the "Alec."

The stage was preposterously small, the house a nutshell. You would have said one of those intimate theatres of the Paris boulevards.

When Oliver entered a lamentable juggler was engaged in the not very difficult task of making his audience believe that his failures were intentional. He was succeeded by a middle-aged siren attired *en bébé*, and possessed of a flaxen wig, a wealth of posterior development and no voice. This lady was very much to the taste of the house which, having cricketed the livelong day, or rather, from one o'clock in the afternoon, and tea'd off butcher's meat, with some kind of relish to it, was now in the mood to indulge in poetic ardours. Seated in the back row of the stalls, Oliver felt on his neck the hot breath of a warehouse clerk, harried and hunted throughout the week, now, hunter in his turn, marking his Saturday night quarry from the ambush of the pit. A ballet, of which the members were nearer his purse than the single turn, was promised.

Vociferously encored, the enchantress begged leave to change her dress, appearing a few seconds later *en prince*, in the costume of a principal boy of the 'nineties. On her head she wore a small toque surmounted by an enormous panache, the colour of pale flamingo, round her neck a dog-collar of paste, in her ears two enormous pearls each of which had cost the greater part of thirty shillings. Her corsage was a beach of precious stones, the size of peewits' eggs. Just as in hairdressers' windows the upper halves of ladies taper to a finality of plush, so the singer's body came to an end in a beading of red

velvet, to start again in a pair of legs which had not necessarily been hers. Between the fleshings a red tongue of velvet clomb to the beading and clipped the two halves of the woman together. Despite elephantine buttocks the legs were shapely, the feet slightly over-filling the red velvet slippers. From the woman's shoulders fell a sheen of magnificence against which the little velvet tongue stood out light-hearted and pranksome. Oliver rose and sought the bar.

This was immediately behind the first or lower circle. A screen glass exercised the two-fold function of preventing the noise of the drinkers from disturbing the audience and of giving the consumers of bad whisky, vile port, and unadulterable beer a view of the stage. The harmless, censored words being lost, grossness seemed double, and the woman presented an infamous spectacle. The arms of the circle seemed stretched to embrace her. At the end of each verse she gave the audience her profile.

Oliver repressed a little shudder.

"Not your style, dearie?" said a voice at his elbow. "Hot stuff, as you might say. All the same I wish I had her pearls."

Oliver looked at the speaker. She was dressed entirely in black, with hardly any attempt at coquetry. Together they moved to the counter, and he watched her drink a glass of something which the barmaid

assured him was port, whilst, out of politeness, he took a sip of vicious brandy.

"I don't think I care much for her," he said.

"Ah, you like 'em thinner, same as they do in my profession?" queried the girl.

"And what, if I may ask . . .?"

"Not *this*," she said, and smiled a little wanly over her glass. "I'm a trapeze-artist, what you'd call an acrobat. The troupe I was in broke up, and I've had no work since."

He saw that she was, if not a pretty, at least a provocative girl, with a snub nose, large mouth containing regular, flashing teeth, a man's figure with slender boyish hips whereon she placed a hand, it might be carelessly or it might be with art. The pose was not so much feminine as effeminate. Her wrists alone were thick, whilst the texture of the hand which held the glass seemed to him coarse. Oliver remembered the bars they had encircled, the number of times they had been dried upon a handkerchief common to the troupe, kissed with burlesque grace in the direction of ecstatic audiences.

"Don't you hate . . . this?" he asked.

"I do and I don't," she answered. "It's a long story and you wouldn't understand, besides we can't talk here." A look of something approaching gravity, certainly of worry, was noticeable on her face now. Oliver resisted the plain invitation to talk elsewhere. She was a thing which, apart from one or two quite

vulgar accidents, he had always striven to ignore. There is no just mean in sex-preoccupation. Either you must conquer it or it will conquer you. Certain people there are who have hit on a happy medium, but they are the people who live in warehouses and keep accounts. Oliver was afraid of women. That is to say, he was afraid of himself.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Olive.”

“Funny! mine’s Oliver.”

The girl looked at him and smiled. “They go well together,” she said.

Oliver put down his glass with determination. “I must be off,” he replied, and turned away.

The woman showed disappointment in her face. Business was poor. It was imperative that she should secure some lover; this was the third who had escaped her. Drink in plenty, and of a sort, these men would pay for, whereas they would be offended if she told them that neither she nor . . . that there had been no food in the house, and that she had not “bitten” since the previous morning. She could not breathe a word of that which, more than hunger, was gnawing at her. In these cases of double distress, heart and stomach confound themselves in common dismay. Perhaps that was the worst of it; she could not tell anybody. She had had five glasses of port; she must husband her senses. It would not do to get tipsy. There was the night air to be

considered, the possibility of a too-officious policeman, and that awful responsibility of which she might not speak.

Through the glass she watched Oliver as he took his seat again in front of the youth with the tight collar, purple neck and scarlet ears. She would have preferred Oliver, but he was hopeless ; she must manœuvre quickly to attract some lout, lest, when it was gone eleven, she decline upon some disgusting greybeard.

She did not put it in those words.

Anxiously, yet with practised effrontery, she looked round the bar. It would not do to go home without money.

The show went gaily on. Performing dogs had succeeded some comedians less intelligent, and now the curtain drew up for the principal turn.

A woman no longer in the first flush of youth, yet still handsome, in whose beauty ran a distinct though not unkindly strain of black blood, made her bow and stood waiting for the last notes of a melancholy symphony. She was dressed, with admirable defiance, entirely in white. From time to time she placed a white kid glove upon her chest more dun than brown, or with the other adjusted the white flower in her black hair. She sang, with a kind of gurgling pathos and an admirable sincerity, assumed or otherwise, some balderdash almost impious in the quality of its sentimental appeal. Something about a news-boy who takes compassion on a starving mite and

invites her to share his home—a doorstep. Something about creeping into a Church during a fashionable wedding and taking each other for childish better or worse. Something about meeting years afterwards. The woman sang this flower of Western culture with conviction, even passion. Eyes glistened in the audience, emotion glued palm to palm. A great sob made itself heard from the back of Oliver's neck.

Having demanded the usual few minutes' grace, the artist disappeared. The band continued to ladle out, and the audience to hum

"It's only a humble door-step,
But there's room for you wiv I;
You're homeless, I see, so share it wiv me,
Don't cry, little girl, don't cry."

When the singer reappeared she was clad entirely in brown—brown silk stockings, brown silk knickers, a silk jumper, such as sailors wear, also brown, loose about the neck but fastening at the wrists with a simple button, and bronze shoes. Round the coffee of her throat a thin circlet of coral was wound so tightly that it looked like the most sinister of beaded rims. You would have said a newly severed head quickly replaced. In the black hair a single scarlet flower splashed like some gout of blood. And then, unexpectedly, she went off into some plantation ditties ignored of the cheap musical publisher. They were, in fact, the real thing. There were no

disciplinable words, there was no accompaniment; the band sat silent. I wish I could say they were rapt in ecstasy; sincerity compels me textually to reproduce what the single 'cello said to the oboe.

“Does that black b—— think she’s going to keep us here all night? Doesn’t she know as the pubs shut at eleven?”

To Oliver this native crooning was quite captivating. There is something demoralising about all polite assumptions. The Chinaman shorn of his pig-tail, the Japanese with his gold spectacles and damnable courtesy, the Indian in patent-leather boots, the Negro in evening dress—all these are humiliations. Therefore this woman of uncertain begetting had annoyed him with her babble of village churches, fashionable weddings; better that she should sing of what she knew, some echo of a tale told over a pot in a far-away forest.

Oliver could see that the woman had been beautiful, was beautiful still. Her skin, he knew, was suave to the touch, like the back of some beautifully-bound book. She had no soul to read, despite the pious assumptions of the missionary.

No, the woman might have no soul but she certainly possessed what must have been a very beautiful body, receiving and giving pleasure.

And then she began to dance.

Not one of those pseudo-Oriental, refrigerative

exercises of blameless young ladies who would be so utterly shocked if you were to take them at the logic of their gestures. This was a frank affair of knee, thigh and belly. "To cure the senses by the means of the soul, and the soul by means of the senses." Where had he read this preposterous nonsense? The senses were all right; why assume they needed curing. And since the soul didn't exist. . . .

The little gout of blood in the woman's hair kept time with the dancing flame of desire.

Throughout the succeeding turn Oliver revolved in his mind certain matters. How ungentlemanly, almost un-English was this affair of passion. . . . He had not more than fifteen or sixteen shillings in his pocket. . . . "Chastity was not dear to the heart of this ventripotent mulatto." Wasn't that Stevenson? And if Stevenson could condone? . . . He was in evening dress. It would be very awkward in the morning. . . . How can that be wrong which has been the burden of all the poets, the very stuff and texture of life in the Grecian age of beauty and the jimp and modish centuries of yesterday? . . . He had forgotten the five-pound note in his cigarette case. . . . How can one keep oneself unspotted from the world and laugh with Rabelais? . . .

He pushed his way out of the theatre, using his elbows a little more freely than a man of feeling should. A woman in the crush swore at him. He murmured a quick apology.

“Wot’s yer ’urry?” spoke the thickened voice of a bully. “Wot’s ’e done, Maria?”

Oliver took a dive under a convenient arm.

The theatre was flanked at each side by a little shop, a stationer’s which sold no stationery, and a chemist’s which dispensed no lawful drugs.

Outside the chemist’s he met his acquaintance of the bar. There was on her face a look which it would be quite wrong to call hopeless misery. A kind of hopeful despair was there imprinted; a settled unhappiness clutching at some straw of temporary alleviation. At once he forgot the half-caste. That is to say, he did not forget her. But this other adventure seemed to him moral, in comparison.

“You look tired,” he said.

“I’ve no luck,” she answered simply.

“Anywhere to go?”

“There ain’t no tables and there ain’t no chairs,” she quoted. “But there’s room for you wiv me.”

They walked on a little way. Oliver turned into a tobacconist’s, ostensibly to buy a cigar, actually to change that five-pound note into less generous gold and silver.

The cab ride which followed saw Oliver much constrained. The distance was short, not more than five hundred yards, but in that space you might overtake or be overtaken by the most respectable of citizens padding supperwards and humming “Nellie from Nightgown Land.” That those things

over which the comic stage purred so complacently could be put into actual practice was unthinkable to these burgesses. Art in these simple minds, or what therein passed for art, was very definitely one thing, immorality another. It was lawful to steep the mind in lewdness, but only the mind. Their city, be it known, was a very moral city. There was a Watch Committee and a bench of magistrates. Before these a certain number of women, described in the *National Conscience* as "of the unfortunate class," were fined with a comfortable regularity; raids were carried out in certain localities at frequent intervals. Cheerfully the better class of tax-payer included the cost of these cleansings of the city among his annual charges, strong in the conviction that his own sons were not, as the French say, for anything in all this. The lovers of these wretched women could only be of the lower orders, and that, of course, didn't matter.

Oliver had judged it expedient to take a cab. You would not have connected the expression on his face with the idea of pleasure.

At the woman's request he told the driver to stop at the corner of one of those streets of which prostitution is the only explanation. Following instructions Oliver hung about the corner for a little time, then walked slowly down as far as number 118, of which he was told the door would be open. A few men in shirt-sleeves sat on their doorsteps or lolled up

against the jamb, smoking and spitting dryly on to the hot pavement. They looked at him incuriously.

Inside the door, in a mean hall straining for respectability, he found his mistress in close confab with a florid woman of filthy, yet motherly, aspect. In less happy days she had doubtless let lodgings to "theatricals."

"I'll call you, dearie, if there's any need," she said gently enough. "Good evening, sir. It'll be ten shillin's for the room, and four for breakfast. Being Sunday you'll 'ave to 'ave wotever there is in the 'ouse—a kipper and a hegg."

Oliver sketched a protest; these projects were becoming distasteful.

"It's the same price whether you have breakfast or not," said the girl in a low voice. "Two shillings each, four shillings the two."

Oliver made a gesture which amounted to assent.

"This way, Sir, if you please."

They mounted.

"What's the old woman mean by 'calling you if there's any need'?" Oliver asked.

"Her old man's bad," replied the girl. "Desp'rate. Took ill a week ago. The doctor, he can't do anything. . . ."

She watched him narrowly.

"You can go if you like. . . . There's no silly nonsense about me, no trap nor nothing. . . . You can go at once if you like, or directly after. . . ."

You're a gentleman, and I know as you'll give me my money."

For a moment the girl had seemed so pathetic, so helpless and so wan that Oliver had stood in apparent hesitation, fingering his waistcoat buttons.

"To cure the soul by means of the senses," he said to himself a little grimly.

Twice during the night the old woman knocked, and the figure lying uneasily at his side glided noiselessly out of door and as noiselessly back.

Once he awoke to find her place empty. He did not know how long she had been away.

How good the morning air of a city slum may be, only those know who have left the intolerable behind. Oliver shuddered as he walked up the Oxford Road, carefully avoiding the nastinesses of the Sunday morning pavement. His coat-collar was turned up, and he thanked that common sense of his which forbade the wearing of an opera-hat in the provinces. He shuddered at the recollection of that wall-paper, discoloured by gas-light, leprous with the coming day, of that untasted breakfast. He breathed deep, and drew the sweet air into his lungs. He wanted a tooth-brush. He was disgusted and tired. A brandy-and-soda as soon as he got home and half-a-bottle of champagne at lunch would put him all right again. And perhaps, after lunch, the sofa and a volume to call into play the curative properties of the soul. Emerson? Yes, Emerson. Or that prag-

matical fellow Lubbock. If one didn't read Lubbock on Sunday afternoons, when mind and body are slack and broken by their labours, when did one read Lubbock? To bring to him the taut mind one must have come, as the Frenchman said, from Africa. Yet Oliver knew very well that in less than five minutes *The Use of Life* would be sent hurtling across the room, and that he would open a well-thumbed volume at that flower of evil which begins :

“Voici le soir charmant, ami du criminel ;
 Il vient comme un complice, à pas de loup ; le ciel
 Se ferme lentement comme une grande alcôve,
 Et l'homme impatient se change en bête fauve.”

Changing, the following Saturday, not obviously into the wild beast, but into the protective colouring of tweeds, enabling the wearer to slink unnoticed down the byways of suspicion, Oliver dined early.

He drank more than usual, was too feverishly impatient to read, and hurried over his compliments to M. Jean, who, mistaking preoccupation for niggardliness, was thereby rendered quite Gallically miserable for the space of forty-eight hours.

The meal, which not the swiftest service could prevent from seeming interminable, came at last to an end, and Oliver sallied forth into that half-light of summer evenings dear to the heart of the lecher. To such the amber and gold in the dying sky are not more beautiful than the quickening yellow of the gas-

lamps, or the coins to be transmuted at will into pleasure. Our lover descended the little dip under the railway arch, climbed the street on the further side, and breasted the tide of pleasure-seekers and pleasure-givers which at this hour sets steadily towards the theatres of the city. Hungrily he peered into the face of every drab who could by any possibility have depended from a trapeze. He had forgotten the woman's features, remembered only certain curves of her body, her taut breasts. He ignored challenges.

At the corner of the infamous little side-street he stopped and hesitated. But only for a moment. Then he began to walk rapidly towards the house of which he remembered, with singular distinctness, the number—118. The eight was broken in two and only the lower half remained.

When he was within some fifty yards of the door whose threshold he desired yet dreaded to cross, he noticed a little knot of people gathering in attitudes of expectancy round something that looked half like a covered-in waggonette, half like a baker's van. He drew nearer, and saw that there was being lifted from the interior of this sinister vehicle the unmentionable thing. Two men carried it into the house, and, in a last ray of the dying sun, Oliver saw the gleam of plate and handles.

He put his hand to his pulse and felt it beating furiously.

After a time the two men came out of the house, drawing their hands across their mouths. They mounted the box, and the dingy horse, turning with difficulty in the narrow street, shambled past him. The men were laughing.

For full ten minutes Oliver hesitated. It was too horrible, this intrusion of death in a house of pleasure. Yet he must know. He waited till the little crowd had dispersed. As he raised his hand to the knocker he perceived that the door was half-open. Through it he heard quarrelling, singing, an oath or two, the babel of bullies.

"Can't you be quiet?" he heard the voice of the florid landlady, "with him up there and all!" Then she came heavily to the door, dragging her carpet - slippers along the tattered oil-cloth.

"It's you, luv, is it?" she said, with easy familiarity. "Dolly's gone out. Bin out this 'alf-hour."

"Is . . . is anybody ill here?" Oliver heard himself ask, and noted, whilst he made it, the incredible fatuity of his question.

"Wot makes you arst, dearie?"

"I . . . I've been waiting since . . . since they went away."

"You see'd 'em bring it then? It's for 'er 'usband, same as was ill lars' Setterday when you was 'ere. Dolly's terrible upset, what with 'im dying when she

wasn't with 'im an all. But she 'ad to go out, so as to bury him decent. Pleurisy it was; never no 'ope from the start. Beat 'er a lot, 'e did, but a good 'usband all the same. According to 'is lights, as you might say."

Oliver shuddered.

"Gone out, you say?"

"Gone to the 'Alec.' I'd ask you to wait, dearie, but she won't be in till past twelve, that is unless she brings someone with her."

Oliver fumbled in his waistcoat pocket.

"Give her this," he said simply.

The woman took the money greedily and counted three sovereigns and half a sovereign. As she turned them over in her palm the conversation in the kitchen ceased.

"She owes me more'n this, Sir," the woman went on. "Seventeen weeks I've kep 'em, body and soul, and 'cept for when she's 'ad a bit of luck, as you might say, no money coming in. And that's the truth."

Oliver emptied his pockets.

"There's nearly six pounds altogether. It's all I've got. Give her four and keep two."

And now he had only one desire, the desire to get away. The woman began to mumble something about next week, after Tuesday. . . .

Oliver turned and ran, literally ran, down that narrow street, as though all the Furies of Shame were

in pursuit. A policeman at the corner looked at him curiously. He pulled himself up and walked more soberly, yet still hastily, towards that residential quarter of Manchester which begins at the Nelson Street Nursing Home.

He was unnerved and disliked the idea of going to his own rooms. He would dig out Jerry.

He found his friend in his lodgings in Ackers Street, a-sprawl in his arm-chair, feet on mantelpiece, pipe in mouth, deep in a Nat Gould. *The Auctioneer's Manual*, and *The Theory and Practice of Quantity-Surveying* had been pitched into the fire-place. Jerry was a student of these entrancing arts, in either, or both, of which he had vague visions of a livelihood.

"Not togged up to-night. What's the matter?" he asked. "You know where the whisky is, and I think there's some soda."

He watched Oliver curiously, and saw that his hand shook.

"Sit down and tell us all about it. Or walk about if you prefer. Anyhow, spit it out."

Oliver obediently recounted the whole affair.

Jerry listened without a single interruption. When the tale, with many half-hearted apologies and allusions to "the kind of thing one does when one is drunk," was finished, he said:—

"M'yes! Allow me to tell you, my dear Noll, that what you take for conscience is nerves, just pure,

silly, senseless nerves. Can't a prostitute have a husband, and mustn't he ever die ? ”

He waived aside a protest, and went on.

“ Of course she can, and of course they do. He probably wasn't her husband, and it's perhaps as well for you that he *was* ill that night.”

“ But think of the poor girl having to walk the streets this evening and all those other evenings. And then in the nights. . . . ”

“ Probably wishing he'd hurry up and get better, or do the other thing. Probably happier to-night than she's been for the devil of a long time. Anyhow it's no good making a romance out of it.”

He sucked at his pipe.

“ It's a rum thing,” he continued. “ You artist fellows make an awful fuss about writing the truth, and jib at it when you meet it. Now if you'd come across your little adventure in Maupassant, you'd have got on your hind legs and spouted a lot of nonsense about slices of life. Instead of which you're all gone at the knees. Better doss down on the old sofa to-night ; you're in no sort of state.”

Oliver consented. It wasn't any good pretending he wasn't afraid. He was. Afraid of that horrid thing he had seen carried into the house. Afraid of what its contents looked like now, would look like in a month, a year, ten years. Afraid of his dreams. He outlined some of this.

“ Tell you what,” interrupted Jerry. “ I'm fed

up with work for to-night. Let's play piquet. I'm going for a tramp over Kinderscout to-morrow, and you'd better come."

"You weren't going to do anything of the sort," said Oliver, "but I will."

CHAPTER IV

AN ADVENTURE

“**S**OON after the events narrated in the last chapter. . . .”

How unutterably splendid it must be to be a real novelist like Wimpole Reredos, to own a writing-desk handsomely appointed with silver candlesticks and massive silver ink-stand, a motor-car, a couple of dachshunds, a pretty wife and still prettier secretary! She it is, one would presume from the later manner of our popular novelists, who provides not only the matter but the style. She is become the ink-well of inspiration, and the last arbiter in the choice of adjectives. How unutterably jolly it must be to get up lazily from the breakfast-table, having laughed one's plenty at the politics of the *Feudal Times*, felt a delicious little thrill of tumbrils in the air at the latest manifesto of the *Red Flag*, admired the respectable temporisings of the *National Conscience*, communed with Mutt and Jeff, and realised yet again that Empires may fall and not make as good a “story” as the intimate babble of a tenth-rate actress! How unutterably jolly,

I say, it must be to rise from the breakfast-table with one's mouth full of toast and marmalade and a newly-filled pipe, to brush the ten or fifteen newspaper-cuttings on one side, gaze out of window upon the sunny Surrey lawn where the dachshunds may be seen amorous or sportive, to watch the approach up the long drive of sad interviewers, paragraphists and other of publicity's riff-raff, and wave them to menial care "round at the back," as humbler folk have it, to sit one's self down after legitimacy's peck on the forehead and the behest "not to overdo it to-day, Wimpole darling,"—to sit one's self down, I repeat, in the adjoining study facing the silver ink-well and the silver candlesticks, and begin one's morning work with a "Well, Miss Smith, where were we?" Miss Smith to reply "Gladwys has just broken off her *liaison* with Lord Thermidore, and you have not decided whether she is *enceinte*. But perhaps you will dictate your letters first."

And then, half-patronisingly, half-servilely, and wholly snobbishly, one would re-peruse that little mauve half-sheet whereon the strawberry-faced Duchess invites Mr. Wimpole Reredos to take communion with her on the following Sunday. One would refuse, of course, not so much because her Grace is a heavy breather and disruptive of one's religious emotion, but because the harder you kick celebrity's toady the more she will lick and fawn.

Yes, the life of a fashionable novelist, with a real

story to tell and no nonsense about moods and atmospheres, must be unutterably jolly. Fancy being able conscientiously to begin a chapter "Soon after the events narrated. . . ." (By the way, should it be "narrated" or "related"? Miss Smith will know.) Fancy having events, actual happenings, for material, and not mere brain-issues! Fancy being a real novelist handling a real plot with a beginning, middle and end, instead of a few sensations, acutely felt, about nothing in particular. Fancy having to spin no cocoon of your own, out of your own urgent bowels, but to be able to go to the world about you for a reach-me-down set of events, a ready-made story. It is not, I am persuaded, for their politics but for their *faits divers* that the English novelist subscribes to *Le Petit Parisien* and his French colleague to the *News of the World*. There's richness for you in the way of plots!

Whereas I, in my garret. . . . But no matter. Let me get back to Oliver and Jerry.

Soon after the events narrated in the last chapter, the two friends determined upon an autumn holiday. It was Jerry who persuaded his chum to go away that his mind might not continue to dwell so insistently upon that brothel. To Oliver the very pavements of the Oxford Road prated of that unknown, ignoble corpse.

Scarborough was the place chosen after much cogitation. Cleethorpes sounded draughty, Skeg-

ness bleak, Cromer smacked altogether too abominably of landed gentry. No, Scarborough was the place: it must be full of people of whom one could make fun.

"Honest souls in pursuit of a month's or fortnight's legitimate romance," said Jerry.

"Counter-jumpers!" retorted Oliver, who was at this period something of an intellectual snob.

To Scarborough, then, they went, putting up at a decent, "private" hotel. That is to say that the hotel was by no means private and only semi-decent. All the half-world—the shopped-at half—of Sheffield and Leeds, Hull and Doncaster was there; storekeepers, poulterers, ironmongers, chemists—cash and otherwise—undertakers. These were the males, ambushed in their month of ease by the females of their kind who hoped to capture them. There was an enormous amount of the highest possible living consistent with a twelve-shilling tariff, and a quite inconsiderable garnishing of the plainest possible thinking. Old ladies sat about after dinner in the "lounge," or draughty back-parlour melancholy with nostalgic, potted palm-trees, whilst their good men wetted their thumbs at solo-whist for halfpence, the young of both sexes baying the moon "on the front."

"Look at Mother Wishfort in the corner lapping up the latest circulating trash."

"Better stuff than you'll ever write, Noll."

"That doesn't make it good," Oliver rebuked his friend. "The nauseating thing about these authors

who sell their two-hundred, three-hundred, five-hundred thousand copies is that they haven't got their tongue in their cheek. The capacity for drivel is beyond the power of human calculation ; it comes directly from God."

There is a type of mind, peculiar to the provinces, which knows intimately the life to be met with in books, but of actual living, beyond getting children and a competence for old age, nothing at all. Thus Oliver. It was not, poor fellow, his fault. There was, in Manchester, no intellectual intercourse. There were the dinner-parties given to a few privileged Christians by the German Jews who owned the big warehouses—dinner-parties at which discussion was principally of the tendency of the bank-rate to rise, and of the fortunes of the Liberal party to fall. There was discussion also of certain Christian and, what was more important, cotton-broking fortunes. The wealth of individual Jews was, with one exception, too much the matter of common knowledge to be worth debate. Alone Strumbach flummoxed them, and his co-religionists turned to wrangling as to the amount of his fortune as insistently as the fox-hunting gentile recurs to the pursuit of women. But there was, at the period of which I write, no intellectual intercourse for the young bachelor. There were lawn-tennis parties, but the intellectual joys of that game soon pale. Either you hit the ball into the net or out of court. Worse still if you hit it

into court, since then the whole wearisome business is to begin all over again. All admirable exercise for the body, for the mind a blank. Oliver could go for weeks at a time, his interlocutors cabmen and waiters. So unbearable had this solitude become that he had taken his fortune of something between seven and eight thousand pounds out of the stocks of the London and North Western Railway Company and the Manchester Corporation Waterworks, and invested it with Messrs. Trion & Venture, a firm of shipping merchants who gave him something to do, five per cent. on his capital and a sixth share in the profits. That this also meant a sixth share in the losses is a matter to which I shall come later. My immediate point is that Oliver knew nothing of life. Witness his perturbation at the coffin'd *souteneur*. Witness now his overthrow at the soft hands of a chit, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the painted harridan reading her after-dinner novel in the lounge of this semi-private, semi-decent hotel.

Mrs. Greatorrex was the overweening wife of the third and essentially timorous partner in the firm of Greatorrex, Greatorrex & Greatorrex, boot and shoe makers of Hull. Peter Greatorrex made the boots in a factory which turned its back on the Humber; James Greatorrex "travelled" the country in his firm's products, *i.e.*, he sold the boots by the gross to the small boot-shops, which in turn sold them in pairs to the consumer. Horrid jargon which sub-

stitutes "consumer" for "wearer": how the devil does one "consume" a pair of boots? John Greateorex, the husband of our novel-reading Mrs. Greateorex ran the shop in the centre of Hull overlooking the Andrew Marvell monument.

Magdalene Greateorex, *née* Wottle, daughter of Thomas Wottle, stout-bottler, of Womb-in-the-Wold, Gloucestershire, was a woman after the heart of Rubens, ventripotent and many-breasted. There was something about her short-throatedness which invincibly conjured up the butcher; the crest on the door of her car could only have been some stunning variety of pole-axe. Beneath layers of powder, which made her face look like an Italian battle-front in mid-winter, were the scorplings of some sixty summers; with her golden wig you would have said a flaming beet served *à l'anglaise*. From her ears diamonds of immoral size hung, dragging the lobes after them in unpleasant obedience to the law of gravity. Mrs. Greateorex called the hotel waiters "dear" to their faces, and goodness knows what in the privacy of her mind. She had as little joy of Greateorex as "cette pauvre Madame Potiphar" had of abnormal Joseph. She was nodding over a novel entitled *The Thighs of a Nymph*.

By her side a slim girl not more, one would have said, than seventeen, was palely crocheting.

"That's a pretty child," said Jerry. "It seems

hardly credible that such delicate chips can proceed from such infamous old blocks."

" 'To the blown rose do they stop their nose that kneeled unto the bud,' " quoted Oliver. "Come, Jerry, where's your literary sense? Let's talk to the old woman."

It is perverse that whereas the occasions of access to the young and beautiful are rare, the approach of old people is of the easiest. At that moment the book fell from the bediamonded hands, whose owner woke up with a start.

Oliver gallantly recovered the volume and, with a certain *gouaillerie*, sketched in presenting it a miniature obeisance of the knee.

"Quite the old-fashioned style," said the lady, quickly aroused from her eupeptic slumbers. "Ring the bell, Rosie, for my port. P'rap's the young gentlemen will honour me by taking a glass."

The young gentlemen signified that the honour would be theirs.

Rosie rang the bell, and those of my readers who adore their Dickens as they should will be glad to learn that she blushed slightly. Her maiden meditations during her mother's nap had been by no means fancy-free. Her imagination had been very definitely concentrated upon Oliver who—I would have told the reader earlier had the information been relevant—was tall, dark and handsome. Jerry—blunt, honest Jerry—had no more need of good

looks, and in any case did not possess them, than Traddles whom he strikingly resembled.

Nor were Rosie's meditations strictly maidenly, in the old-fashioned novelist's sense. They were, in point of fact, such as Harriet Martineau, George Eliot and Mrs. Humphry Ward would have considered strictly unmaidenly, being those purely natural in a growing girl. Exactly what Rosie had been thinking was that a walk along "the front," gallantly escorted, would be a proper and delightful ending to a ripping day of lawn-tennis.

The reader must not imagine that the child was "flighty." She was not. She was essentially a "good" girl, with an enormous desire for self-improvement and no mind to improve, fond of outdoor games, a competent, scrupulously-fair centre-forward at hockey, a straight but shortish driver at golf, possessed of a capital pitch-shot up to the hole, of which she was never afraid, a girl who, when she served at lawn-tennis, kept both feet on the ground, and put the first ball into the net as regularly as she went to Church—in short a potential mother of our race, ready to welcome those

"Clambering limbs and little hearts that err"

so soon as it should please Providence to send her a curate, or other young man who should know his mind. Rosie was one of those who are destined from birth to marry into the Church.

Psychologists are always wrong. A psychologist would have told you that a girl who was the daughter of a bootmaker like John Greatorex, descendant of a line of bootmakers, and Magdalene Greatorex, *née* Wottle, must be "common." Rosie was not common. Rosie was a gentle little soul. She might have been lady-like but was not; that adjective presupposes the existence of ladies to be imitated. Now Rosie had never seen a lady; she had spent all her life in Hull without genteel encounter. She was just gentle, natural and healthy-minded; she respected herself, but respected the Rev. Arthur Tombs still more; was perfectly prepared to wait for him, until such time as she was forty, or Arthur had definitely preferred above her some other young woman whose father dredged or trawled or whatever it is they do to the Humber to make it yield a living. In the meantime, if some other young man offered—all very well and good. Also it was a glorious evening, with a sunset like a squashed Victoria plum.

The waiter appeared, a "good-looker" in horse-parlance, and at once took Magdalene Greatorex's eye. As the young man listened to minute, detailed, and prolonged instruction as to the number on the bottle of port, and of the glasses to be brought, "*cette pauvre*" Madame Greatorex took him in, as they say, from the nape of the neck with its little golden tendrils, down the curve of the back, obsequious with much whisking away of plates and solicitous

“ ‘Ock or sherry, Mum ? ” to the sturdy calf, thickened as a ballerina’s with standing behind chairs. Magdalene surveyed the fellow with what the French call so admirably “ the undressing eye,” much, that is, as Lady Booby surveyed Joseph Andrews who, the reader remembers, wrote, “ Dear sister, you would have thought my mistress had a mind to me.” Let not a censorious world mistake. Magdalene Greatorex would not have dishonoured her husband even to save him from the scaffold. Her continual faithfulness was as a headstone to one still living.

What young Adonis, bred, if I may so put it, in each and every one of those Seven Dials and finally born in the obscure purlieus of the Tottenham Court Road, what Adonis thought about this puffing harridan, it were also not fitting that I should record. Sufficient if I say that an apprenticeship as assistant-waiter at Montebello’s now stood him in good stead. He allowed Magdalene to rest her dumpy, podgy, sweltering hand upon his—pretext, the steadying of the bottle—for such period as should ensure the increase of tip from one shilling to two.

“ Thank you, my lady ! ” he said, and bowed himself out to two seats at the Pierrots, a bitter for himself and a Guinness for his girl.

Montebello’s had taught him that when you called such a woman “ My lady ” you were generally right.

The Greatorex came back to her port. Glasses were

touched and compliments passed. Oliver had a word to say for the bouquet, Jerry for the colour.

"Orange-tawny," he called it, in a flight of reminiscent fancy rare in that young man.

"Ousel-tawny," amended Oliver, "by ellipsis."

"The ousel cock so black of hue
With orange-tawny bill."

Little Rosie thought she had never heard such fine talk.

"'Tis all one, lawks-a-mussy!" quoth Magdalene. "I like young men as looks upon 'the wine when it is red,'" she continued, quoting from the last page of *The Thighs of a Nymph*.

"It's husbands who look too much upon the whisky when it's yellow as I object to," she went on, casting a totally unwarranted aspersion upon her spouse, who "indulged" only on lodge nights.

John Greateorex belonged to the Ancient Order of Rams, of the Southdown branch whereof he was a leading Horn, and hoped one day to be made Grand Tup. On lodge nights he would sally forth cumbered with many little boxes containing the jewels of order—ram's heads of every known variety, to which were attached ribbons of unimaginable colour inscribed with what, had the profane ever seen them, must have been unintelligible lettering in gold. Thus the letters F.B.S.W.G.I. and a date meant that on a certain day in a certain private room in an uncertain

public-house John Greateorex had become the Founder of the Black Sheep and White Goat Inseparables. The Rams are a very sociable and convivial brotherhood. They do an immense amount of good and dispense enormous amounts in charity. As they are common and kind-hearted, so it may be presumed that they are well seen of God. When two of the flock meet in a bar they first incline their foreheads with a slight butting motion, then hold up their glasses, clink and say "F.R. to B.R." which means "Foot-Rot to Bad Rams !"

John was not due until the Friday evening, when he would run down for the week-end, to be gathered ineffectually to Magdalene's breast. In the absence of a more legitimate squire, Jerry Hanmer proposed an arm for a turn on the front. Now if there was one thing which Mrs. Greateorex disliked it was exercise ; but, on the other hand, if there was something which she liked very much indeed, it was to be seen on the arm of a presentable cavalier. She took a sip at her port and thought she wouldn't, wishing that it had been Oliver who proffered. Another sip, and then she thought she would, intending that there should be some gallant rearrangement of wraps, in the scuffle whereof she and her daughter might exchange cavaliers.

"Run for your hat, ehild, and fetch me my fur," she gurgled.

And then they sallied forth.

A listener privileged to overhear two conversations would at once have realised that Jerry had the easier task. The elder talk, beginning with a compliment on the magnificence of Mrs. Greatorex's stole, ran easily on ermine and chinchilla.

"I can't abide rabbit," she said, caressing the pelt of one of God's more expensive creatures.

Jerry enlarged upon the habits, habitat, and moral character of the rat, a treacherous animal apt to sell its skin dearly. Or so the wholesale furriers affirmed, and the retailers echoed.

Oliver set himself to find some common ground whereupon he and fragile Rosie might walk together.

True to his type as literary fledgling, he led the talk round to the books and authors Rosie liked best. He mentioned several goodish writers,—including Bulwer and Charles Reade—and knew at once from Rosie's reiterated "Very nice," that she had not read a line of them. In return Rosie murmured the titles of several stories unknown to Oliver—*Poppies in Corn*, *Petunia*, *Lad's-love* and *Lady's Bower*, a whole sentimental arboretum. Rosie didn't know who the authors were.

And then, for the first time in his life, it suddenly occurred to Oliver that literature was supremely unimportant. The over-ripe plum of the sky had given place to purple—"dowager's pall" he named the colour. There was a trifle of wind coming up from just beyond the end of the pier, which sprawled upon

the emerald sea like some illuminated serpent. A lick of salt sprayed the cheeks of the promenaders. Both couples had turned once or twice, and according as Oliver and Rosie followed or preceded the others, so, instinctively, they drew closer together, or more apart. As the sky darkened the voices of those whom they encountered and re-encountered became more and more subdued, till presently talk sank to a mere accompaniment of motion. Then, suddenly, the lights in the little kiosk shone out upon the night, and a band innocent of Germany began the ever-delightful *Schöne blaue Donau*.

By this time the good Greatorex had quite "cottoned" to Oliver's friend, whom she had promoted from "Mr. Hanmer" to "Mr. Jerry." A proposal that they should listen to the concert was graciously accepted. Chairs were found, Mrs. Greatorex remarking humorously that she would "try" one, which, albeit with much groaning, eventually bore the strain. And really it seemed to Oliver that the subsequent Elgar (*Salut d'Amour*), Edward German (those even then tiresome *Dances*), Godfrey Boshington (*Neptune*—a British Fantasia introducing "Tom Bowling" as cornet-solo) and Sullivan (*The Gondoliers*) were to him for the first time revealed. At the phrase "Take a dainty little hand" he made furtive capture of Rosie's, which was surrendered unconditionally. How soft it was! Rosie did not seem at all frightened.

Adieux for the night were intermingled with plans for the morrow. Later the two friends sat for a while on the verandah of the "private" hotel, smoking and hardly speaking. Every young girl knows what Oliver's thoughts were; every young woman dreams them for her lover. Jerry was meditating a warning.

As they separated to go to their rooms he spoke.

"It's a rum thing, Noll," he said, "that a pretty little slip of a girl like that should grow up into an old faggot like her mother."

"Go to hell!" replied his friend.

Throughout the ensuing days life was such as invoice-clerks dream it from the end of one August holiday to the beginning of the next—a continual round of seaside pleasures. In the morning there was the Spa, and Oliver, who in his way was a bit of a dandy, could give free rein to a discriminating taste in nicely-creased flannels, white cricket-boots—which whenever he ventured upon that pastime, were changed for a more serviceable pair—and a blazer, gaudy but not seriously committal. To appear on the front in a yachting cap and the M.C.C. colours was a solecism to be avoided. In the afternoon there were picnics—knickers of Harris tweed the indisputable wear—drives on four-horsed char-à-bancs, saunters through the yellowing bracken. On each and every occasion Rosie looked fresh, innocent, and by virtue of those very qualities, inviting.

Oliver desired to listen throughout the remainder of his life to the meaningless strains of Auber in the companionship of fetching little Rosie, to bandy pleasantries with the Gargantuan Magdalene—whom Jerry had re-christened Aunt Titania—as she reclined against some well-chosen oak and watched the preparations for tea in the undergrowth, to wander romantically sunsetwards with Rosie like Mr. Chevalier and his old Dutch in the last minute of that six-reel film, to seize and hold and caress that little hand on the top of a coach under the friendly-falling shades of summer night. Nature uses many devices for the furthering of her absurd ends—the beauty of innocence, Waldteufel, a good “floor.” And that victory which the heated ball-room fails to bring off may often be achieved by a stiff nor’-wester and a lick of spray. Let my lady paint and powder an inch thick, she will not come at the complexion of a little goose on a promenade.

The less Rosie said the more firmly she wound herself round Oliver’s heart. Looking back over what I have written I find that she has not endeared herself to the reader by so much as one single, artless quack. Her charm must, I fear, be taken for granted. Possibly it was charm only to Oliver. Since even the holding of hands becomes at long last a monotony, he found himself forced to make conversation, rather on the lines of Mrs. Markham’s Questions and Answers. But the process was an

inversion, Oliver's questions being invariably complicated, Rosie's replies no more than an assurance that something or other was "nice."

Late one afternoon our hero came upon his little mistress seated upon some rocks which ran out into the sea. She had been reading, a book lay open in her lap, and her eyes were fixed not upon the immensities of sea and sky but upon the complexities of Miss Elizabeth Wetherell's thought. The story was *The Wide, Wide World*, and the open page was that which follows the death of Alice. Her lover, looking over her shoulder, read a sentence or two. "The early sun filled the valley with patches of light and shade. The sides and tops of the hills looking towards the east were bright with the cool brightness of the morning. . . . The night had swept away all the heat of yesterday. . . . The air was fresh with the dew and sweet from hay-field and meadow; the birds were singing like mad all around. . . . 'Alice is *there* now,' thought Ellen; 'she is happy, why should I be sorry for her? I am not; but, oh! I must be sorry for myself. Oh, Alice! Alice!'"

Oliver returned the book.

"Jolly?" he queried.

"It is very sad," answered Rosie. "I think Miss Wetherell is a sweet writer, don't you?"

Oliver assented.

"Mr. Tombs says that she and Miss Yonge help a girl to realise the womanhood that is in her. I don't

quite know what he means, but then Mr. Tombs is very clever."

"What do you like best in the world?" asked Oliver a little later, and was staggered by the comprehensiveness of Rosie's reply.

"Being good," she said simply.

John Greateorex came down after business on the Friday evening. His physiognomy bore the imprint of his wife's thumb; to look at him you knew that Magdalene was master in her own house. John was a mean-looking, mean-thinking little man, high-souled in so far as he was a churchwarden, went round with the plate and joined in the clerical pretence that the resultant sum was an "offering" not to be measured in terms of shillings and pence. John Greateorex had one talent only—that of salesmanship. He could sell a pair of boots with or against any boot-maker living, and was a master of that art of small subserviencies in which lies the whole genius of shop-keeping. When he said "This is a go-o-d bo-o-ot, Madam"—lengthening the vowels like some ecstatic preacher and passing his thumb over a toe-cap with the gesture of a sculptor dwelling lovingly upon his clay—why then the customer knew the boot was good. All argument was at an end. To buy a pair of boots at Greateorex's was a ritual, a hygienic rhapsody. First the general health of the customer was inquired after. Assurances thereanent being forthcoming, John Greateorex would grow solicitous about

the feet. Was the trouble a little easier, that little callosity less painful? Corns and bunions were gross words fit only for your ready-made bootmaker; in this fitting-on room they were unheard. Greatorex's had the selectest and most influential trade in Hull; John's demeanour to his clients was an accurate index to their social standing. He attended personally to all who paid house-rent exceeding fifty pounds a year, kept a brougham or went up to town in May. -Less affluent feet were shod by the assistants, of whom there were three, though in the case of some awkward malformation, hammer-toes or a dropped arch, John would appear in an advisory or consultant capacity. But even then he would not actually handle the foot. When John graciously condescended so far as to smooth the leather over your instep you were assured not only that the bo-o-ot was a go-o-od fit, but that your rung on Hull's ladder was an enviable one.

Rosie had been escorted to a concert by Noll and Jerry; Magdalene had remained in the public drawing-room of the private hotel to welcome her titular lord and master, and to give him some inkling of the sentimental situation.

"There's a young sprig from Manchester after our Rosie," was her blunt intimation.

"Any wool to his back?" asked John, who cared nothing for name or state except as indications to credit.

“ He’s not without, I should think,” said Magdalene, “ but, of course, I left that for you, dear.”

“ And does Rosie . . . ? ”

“ Caught her crying twice, so she’s happy about something, and I can’t see no other young man to account for it.”

“ The little minx ! ”

And when Rosie came in at half-past ten, soberly and properly escorted, her father first allowed her to kiss him, then held her away from him at arm’s length, and smoothing her cheek with his thumb, said :

“ She’s a go-o-od girl, is my Rosie. She’s a go-o-od girl. Now which of you young gents is Mr. Sheldon and which is Mr. Hanmer ? ”

Introductions were effected, and half an hour passed in the enjoyment of whisky-and-soda and appropriate jocosities. Mr. Greatorrex departed on the Tuesday, and that week was a replica of the first. On the second occasion Oliver met the old man at the railway station, but nothing “ definite ” was said by him then, or at any time during the remainder of the young men’s stay. Contrary to Magdalene’s expectation, and indeed to Rosie’s, Oliver did not “ declare.” When he announced that his holiday was drawing to an end her father regretted the rupture of an acquaintance so pleasantly begun.

“ Glad to show you round Hull any time you may be in our part of the world,” the old man said, prompted by his spouse, who had seen a shade of

anxiety creep into Rosie's smile. The invitation was not made in Jerry's hearing, and Oliver made no mention of it.

As soon as they were settled in their compartment Jerry said :

“ Rummy how one can drop an intimacy and think no more about it ! They were pretty desperate about landing you, Noll.”

His friend made no reply.

Oliver found Manchester life duller than ever. His activities with Trion & Venture were a purely formal affair, his capital and not his interests being engaged. If he was not a sleeping partner he was at least a somnolent one. Nobody who has not endured it can have the least idea what life in a Manchester shipping warehouse is like. Grandiloquize though you may, confuse the issue with talismanic phrases like C.I.F. and F.O.B., cast over it the glamour of catchwords such as Bill of Lading, Acceptance at Sight, Draft at Thirty Days, the traffic remains one of huckstering and barter. There is no more essential nobility in shipping a million loin-cloths to cover a million Calcutta nakednesses than in measuring, parcelling and handing over the counter half-a-dozen yards of Horrocks's best long-cloth for home consumption. But the firm dealt in other things besides calico—in tin plates and enamelled baths. They would book an order for six dozen gross of tooth-brushes and once they had an inquiry for a thousand fiddles—“ if at

eleven pounds a dozen." Office work occupied all the morning. Then came lunch, a gross business of chop or steak, half of bitter, all the sauces which the genius of Crosse & Blackwell has called into existence, and small-talk culled from the current number of *Fun and Frolic*. High 'Change followed, where you met your fellow-lunchers or their kind, and listened to their hearty eructations. Fifty honest fellows insisted upon giving you their clammy, be-ringed, unsavoury and altogether unshakable paws. You discussed the monsoon which, whether it had broken or not, was always put forward as a reason why the Indian should make his old loin-cloth do instead of ordering a new one. At three o'clock you "adjourned" to a club to drink whisky which you didn't want with men you didn't like. From four to six you wrote, or, if you were a partner, signed letters "advising" this or "submitting" that to people you had never seen. It is the sort of life which, pursued with genius, ends in a peerage and the writing of pamphlets entitled "My Pile and How I Made It."

It is the sort of life of which every moment, to the artist, is unbearable. And Oliver had that supreme disqualification. He was very much the artist, in make-up if not in achievement. Before him shone that most treacherous of Jack-o'-Lanterns, the conviction of Ultimate Triumph. His trust in himself was unshaken by the failure of others. You might tell him of some luckless composer whose desk

was crammed with fourteen operas fully scored and unperformed, of some industrious fellow in the 'forties now tackling his twenty-seventh unproduced drawing-room comedy. Nolly would agree with a slow motion of the head.

“That’s their tragedy. Ninety-nine out of every hundred artists are tragic fellows. I shall succeed!”

It may be asked how Oliver, always so fond of Rastignac’s threat to Paris, “*A nous deux, maintenant!*” could refrain from a direct assault upon London and a shake of the fist from, say Willesden. To ask this is not to know provincial inertia, cowardice and lethargy. One is not the son of a Manchester chemist for nothing.

I have told how my hero’s first works were imitations of that rough-and-tumble genius, Balzac. He now fell to a more subtle lure. The Goncourts gave him the fullest sense of the nothingness of human life, and clothed that futility with the fullest measure of poignancy. He came to know huge chunks of the novels by heart, and would while away with their mute recital the boredom of that hour on ‘Change. His lips would frame themselves to a mechanical “Our best offer 10,000 No. 17 Shirtings at 11/9 Aug.-November equally, cannot improve or leave over”—a jargon which no human being should be called upon to utter—but his mind would be with poor Mdlle. de Verandeuil seeking the grave of Germinie Lacerteux in its pauper corner, or with the parents of Renée

Mauperin dragging their existence from one end of the earth to the other in vain attempt to exhaust it.

Sometimes he would chant half-aloud :

“Et parfois, dans ce jour du commencement de la journée, dans ces heures légères, dans cette lumière qui boit la rosée, dans cette fraîcheur innocente du matin, dans ces jeunes clartés qui semblent rapporter à la terre l'enfance du monde et ses premiers soleils, dans ce bleu du ciel naissant où l'oiseau sort de l'étoile, dans la tendresse verte de mai, dans la solitude des allées sans public, au milieu de ces cabanes de bois qui font songer à la primitive maison de l'humanité, au milieu de cet univers d'animaux familiers et confiants comme sur une terre divine encore, l'ancien Bohême revit des joies d'Éden, et il s'élève en lui, presque célestement, comme un peu de la félicité du premier homme en face de la Nature vierge.”

Oliver's order booked or rejected, he would telephone the event to his office and seek a basement café in St. Ann's Square. There he would read and re-read his beloved brothers, and now and again Henry James, and map out his creative work for the evening.

The point I want to make here is that the exact value of Oliver's scribblings is immaterial, that the old question of the artist is not affected by his achievements or his failure. The readiness is all. A good artist is no more “impossible” than an immature one. He pays ransom for his impossibility in works of art ; the other gives his note of hand in full intention of

redeeming it ultimately. The spirit is willing—it is beside the point that brush or pen may be weak.

Throughout August and September Oliver and Rosie corresponded regularly. I am afraid his letters were in the nature of treatises, of a priggish and literary order. Hers were artless effusions, breathing adoration of her dashing Manchester cavalier and a deep, and potentially marital, regard for the Rev. Tombs. Queer, pleading little letters they were, written in violet ink and neat roundhand upon grey paper. They contained long and circumstantial accounts of the last Church “social,” and how beautifully Mr. Tombs had spoken, of a Concert and how martially Mr. Tombs had desired, in a tenor voice, that he might fall, of a dance and how well Mr. Tombs waltzed. Thanks would be returned for Oliver’s gift of *The Mill on the Floss*, with some echo of what her mentor had said on the subject of George Eliot. Once Oliver was treated to a minute description of the plot of a novel called *From Jest to Earnest*. And then came an intimation that Papa and Mamma would be very glad to see him if he cared to spend a week-end at Hull.

Was our friend in love? Yes. Did he love Rosie? No. It is one thing to find glamour in gilt, another to endure the gingerbread. Othello is the typical instance of the lover who could not see an inch beyond his own passion; if he had really cared for Desdemona she might have been forty thousand strumpets, and

he would have remained her willing slave. A decent woman is the humdrum of love. Whereas to love a harlot is to know the extremity of torture and of bliss. Possibly the desire to cut out the bespectacled Tombs—the spectacles were a pure assumption—was the principal factor in Oliver's acceptance of the parental invitation. He proposed himself for the following week-end.

It may not be amiss to record here that John Greateorex had made inquiries into the financial standing of Oliver's firm. Those who have not moved in trade circles may not be aware of the existence of certain directories, from the compilers of which no financial secrets are hid. For a guinea a year you become a subscriber, and a glance between fat and unholy covers tells you whether the magnate at whose house you dined last night keeps a motor-car too many, or whether the struggling little merchant over the way can really afford a second parlour-maid. Oliver's dossier had proved satisfactory. His firm was "enterprising but not reckless," and had shown steady progress from small beginnings. To the retail tradesman there is magic in the words "small beginnings." They are part of that creed which, after rehearsing that Rome was not built in a day, goes on to preach that a penny saved is a penny gained, that if you do not waste you will not want. Oliver was shown as a partner with two other men who, collectively, were marked as "good for all

engagements." John Greateorex estimated his prospective son-in-law at a minimum of eight hundred a year. The stipend of the Rev. Tombs was, in comparison, beggarly. Also the boot trade was not doing any too well. People had taken to growing ready-made feet, or at least to adapt them to the standard measurements of those American boot-and-shoe companies which, about this time, began to flood the country with superior advertisements and inferior wear. Things were not as good as they had been. Willis, the tailor next door, a member of Greateorex's lodge, with one more ring to his horn, had just engaged his daughter to an under bank-manager with no more than four hundred a year. Rosie's engagement to Oliver would be one up against the supercilious old Ram. With the girl off her hands and no further necessity for Magdalene to pinch and scrape—of neither process, be it said, had she an inkling—his wife would be able to queen it at Harrogate, Droitwich, Homburg, Aix-les-Bains. It was conceivable that, abroad, Magdalene might cease her nagging. Something of this was communicated to the lady as they lay back to back in their night-lit alcove. The two bodies in one bed had the air of trim mounds in a cemetery.

Magdalene bethought her that she had always heard that Italian waiters, such as one met at foreign spas, had eyes unimaginably luscious. But it was less these things than their daughter's young affec-

tions which were openly discussed by this pair whom man had brought together—Magdalene had in the dim past been a boot-hand at the Greatorrex factory—and God had not thought fit to put asunder. So moved was John after ten minutes of sentimentalities that, by association of memory, he turned and, putting his arm round his wife, held her in tender, ineffectual embrace.

Oliver wrote that he would arrive at Hull at half-past four on Friday evening. Rosie and her mother met him at the station, and drawing-room tea was surmounted without difficulty. At half-past six Oliver was invited to wash his hands as “the meal” would be ready at seven, and Mr. Greatorrex, who always came home punctually at five minutes before that hour, hated above all things to be kept waiting. This piece of information should have been a warning to Oliver not to dress, but he did not heed it and descended in mediate panoply—to wit, dinner-jacket and black tie. He found John Greatorrex in a cut-away coat of grey tweed, aggressive watch-chain with seals, and dark grey spats. Magdalene was décolletée, Rosie simple and unaffected in something pink with a black sash.

Must I describe the house? As this is to be Oliver’s first and last visit, let a single room suffice. It is the dining-room. From the ceiling, high as the tea which is the family’s evening meal, hangs an enormous cut-glass chandelier. The walls are covered

with embossed imitation leather, of the colour of arterial blood. Over the massive walnut sideboard is a portrait of John Greatorrex in his twenties, at that period one of Humber's beaux. On either side of him is an oil-painting representing (*a*) a starving gipsy with tears in her eyes, and hands clasping her shawl as though fearful of rape, and (*b*) the same young woman radiant after downfall, attired for Cremorne. Over the mantelpiece Magdalene simpers in her bridal-gown (a photograph). Landseers flank her. On the opposite wall desperate frigates are being driven on to rocks of india-rubber in a sea of porridge. Some cows, waterfalls and Alpine peaks. In each corner of the room a statue on a pedestal—a Neapolitan fisher-boy, his Tyrolese fiancée, a mother with infant at breast and wedding-ring eliminative of slur, Garibaldi. There are no books. The furniture is "handsome" and the chairs are easy; the carpet is the same colour as the tomato soup which preludes the cold salmon covered by a shroud of parsley sauce. A clock on the mantelpiece swarms with allegory. Bronze horses rear.

The meal passed to the accompaniment of the heartiest commonplaces, Oliver beginning to dread the tête-a-tête when he and his host should be left alone. That event was, however, forestalled, Magdalene beseeching her men-folk, as she playfully termed them, not to deprive her of their company.

"Always remember, Rosie," she said archly, "that

the way to keep a man is to pretend to like smoking in your drawing-room." In that apartment a bottle of Gilbey's second-best port and a box of cigars—Havana tobacco, British make—awaited them. At nine o'clock visitors began to "drop in."

Numberless comedies have been written on the essential absurdity of the middle-classes. The first act displays the parents of the young woman upon whom a Marquis has made amorous descent. He has saved Violet's life by tying up her boot-lace in a tube lift. She is pretty and anæmic; her parents are vulgar, but stout of soul. The second act reveals their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Snout, the Rev. Septimus Snug, Mrs. Dr. Quince, Bottom the Mayor, Miss Starveling. The third act finds the Marquis taking the whole preposterous caboodle to his Tudor bosom.

But Mrs. Greatorex's friends were by no means grotesque. Perhaps they would not easily pass what our cheap newspapers call the "acid test" for gentility, but they were not in any sense ridiculous. They were simply the sort of people who, once a year, visit the Isle of Man and, though unable to distinguish the sharp end of a boat from the blunt, pride themselves upon recognising the *Manxman* or the *King Orry* at three miles out from their hotel-windows. John's cronies, Brother Rams to a man, were perhaps a trifle lavish in the way of fobs and seals; their women-folk baa'd and bleated

good-heartedly enough. Oliver was conscious that he was being "presented" by the family, that the guests were "looking him over." And faintly, very faintly, he resented this. Something which might have passed for whist, occurred at a table; at the piano a Miss Vining, an instructress in the manipulation of that instrument, attuned her spirit to Mendelssohn. Rosie sang a ballad, in comparison with which the outpourings of Claribel were an outrage upon public modesty. Coffee was served at ten o'clock. When the guests had departed after expressing gladness at having met Oliver and a significant eagerness for further acquaintance, Mr. Greatorrex invited our hero to join him in his "study" and partake of a glass of whisky.

"Now for it," thought Oliver.

John Greatorrex was not a practised speaker, and he arrived at his subject only after an infinity of circumlocutions. He enlarged upon Rosie as he would upon a boot of his own manufacture.

"Rosie's a go-o-od girl," he said. "We should not like to lose Rosie."

This in the voice with which he regretfully sold a boot out of his show-case.

Finally, he cleared his throat and took the plunge.

"We are not," said John, "speaking for Mrs. G. and self, aware of the exact state of our daughter's affections, but we feel that she should not bestow

them where . . . where they are not. . . . You take me, young man ? ”

“ My intentions are strictly honourable,” said Oliver, kicking himself as he said it.

“ Oh, undoubtedly,” replied John. “ Neither Mrs. G. nor myself have the least fear of that. But are they business-like ? ”

Oliver’s intentions were also business-like.

He was enjoined to seek Rosie and ensue her.

And went to bed that night the most miserable of young men.

Saturday was passed in doing the sights of Hull. And such sights ! In the evening, as a great “ treat,” the lovers were taken to the Dress Circle of the local theatre to witness a performance of *San Toy*. But only after immensities of discussion, John’s leanings being strictly Puritanical, and away from the theatre. Won over by the insistence of Magdalene and Rosie, John compounded for seats removed as far from the stage as possible. He had a second objection to the stalls besides the purely moral one. It would not do, he said, for him to appear to put himself on a level with his customers. To occupy similarly-priced seats savoured of presumption.

The day passed in sparring for an opening. In the cab on the way back from the theatre Oliver sought, and successfully found, Rosie’s moist, affectionate little paw.

Sunday morning—Church. To Oliver’s surprise

Arthur Tombs, the curate, appeared to be a very hefty young man under his vestments. He read the lessons as though they were not ritual but sense. In the afternoon Rosie attended Sunday school, where it is to be imagined that she taught. Magdalene took Oliver for a drive in the environs of Hull. In the evening, Church again. Mr. and Mrs. Greatorex lingered a little to talk with the Vicar's wife, and so it happened that the young couple walked home alone.

Is there any time less capable of being occupied than the interval between Evensong and Sunday night's supper? If there is, I do not know it. Rosie, a thought discouraged by her lover's silence, threw herself into the arm-chair facing the remains of a roast rib of beef and a cold fowl. Oliver leaned over the back of the chair.

"What pretty hair it is," he said.

"What does it matter to you?" Rosie replied with some petulance.

Oliver bent over and silenced her in the old, immemorial way. When at length he lifted his head he saw Mr. and Mrs. Greatorex standing, tremulous and ecstatic, in the doorway.

"Rosie has done me the honour of consenting to be my wife," he said. And as he spoke a horrid recollection of the seducer in *Magda* came over him.

"And you never whispered a word to me about it,"

cried Magdalene. "Weep here, my child!" And she offered her capacious bosom.

That night the amorous fellow went to bed more miserable than ever.

On Monday Oliver must visit the shop, and what few scales there were fell from his eyes. The wealthy wife of an owner of a fishing fleet found the bootmaker not only cringing, but prostrate; and as he knelt and took her portly foot Oliver could have sworn that the low-born fellow put forehead to carpet in triple salute. And it dawned upon him that Rosie would become a breeder of little bootmakers, ready to drop on their knees, to abase themselves, to perform Oriental obeisance. It would not be Rosie's fault, but there it was. How he got through the remainder of that day he never knew. That young woman now seemed as little extraordinary as the pebble which, picked up last year on the gleaming, spray-flung beach, now encumbers your mantelpiece. There was no change in the child—that he knew well. The difference was in himself. It was the fresh air and salt of Scarborough which had fooled him to the top of his bent. And that night as he tossed and turned in the "best" bedroom he knew that, his week-end over and leave taken, he would never again see Rosie, never write to her, never marry her. He had made a mistake and Rosie must pay. He was a hound.

I shall avail myself of an old privilege here and "draw a veil" over a lot of things.

Over Rosie's tears and heartache, the Greatorex fury, the whispers of the neighbours. Oliver got out of his entanglement by pretending that it didn't exist. Rosie didn't enter an action for breach of promise. Jerry wasn't prodigal of moral support.

"Damned fool!" was his only comment.

CHAPTER V

AND ANOTHER

IS there a completer melancholy than that of the South of France? It is a melancholy of which the casual holiday-maker knows nothing. He, happy fellow, dines adequately at the Gare de Lyon, smokes his cigar in the comfort of his express and admirable compartment until such time as the attendant pulls down his *couchette*, sleeps the good sleep of Cook and the P.L.M., and wakes to find himself hurtling through a diminutive landscape dotted with stunted growths. The fellow-traveller to whom he has confided that this is his first journey south will tell him that they are olive trees; the sunshine and Mediterranean blue he will recognise for himself. And so on to Nice or Monte Carlo where the green carpet is not that which poets sing. Returning, he will discourse in Surbiton of the delights of villeggiatura, and swear that a book of verses underneath the olive-bough were for his old age happiness enow. Only those English-minded who endured Provence for that eternity which was the war know that wilderness is not in the soil but in the mind, that

banishment, though it be to a smiling Paradise, is none the less exile. Guide-books echo the ecstasy of the passer-by; to him who must make his daily meal of their riches these banquets are a mockery.

My present chapter will have nothing to do with the war, which publishers deem it expedient that authors should forget. But there *was* a war, you know, as the jetsam of kerb and gutter reminds us. For the life of me I cannot see how story-tellers are going to get over those four—or was it fourteen—years. Their heroes must have spent them somehow.

When Oliver took his seat in the eight o'clock express for Marseilles on a date in early '15 he was full of those strange ardours which stirred England at that time, and were reflected even in her comic papers. There was a high-heartedness about those dark days which a victory mishandled by the politicians can never recapture. In that soaring of the spirit Oliver forgot his private worries. The fever called training was ended at last, and he was an officer in His Majesty's Army Service Corps dumped down in his country's defence some three hundred and fifty miles from the enemy's line. He forgot that on a certain fourth of August the greater part of Messrs. Trion & Venture's assets had been riddled and blown skywards. Bales of Manchester cottons make excellent ramparts, particularly when the credit on them has still six months to run. The Serbians knew this, and who shall blame them if they took shelter behind elaborately

dyed and patterned piece-goods at six months' sight ? Oliver forgot all those protracted colloquies with bank-managers alternately prosy and excited, of which, moreover, it would be idle to pretend that he had understood more than the merest drift. That drift had narrowed down in his consciousness to three elementary facts. First, that his partners owed their Manchester Bank, some Jew financiers in London and a score of Lancashire cotton manufacturers a great many thousands of pounds. Second, that some thirty oily merchants in Belgrade owed Trion & Venture several thousand pounds more than that firm owed its Bank, those Jews and the hard-headed little fellows from Accrington and Burnley. Third, that the value of these book-debts was problematical which, in war-time, is a longer way of spelling *nil*. That had been the drift ; the upshot had been as near bankruptcy as makes no matter. To make a long story short, Oliver had got out of the mess with a sum of nine hundred pounds exactly, a commission in the Army and a complete outfit including wrist-watch, field-glasses, service-revolver and an ingenious arrangement for washing in the open air.

It is, perhaps, not easy to devise an entirely heroic explanation as to why Oliver had chosen this serviceable corps in preference to one more pronouncedly combatant. Remember that he was thirty-three, and inclined to a certain fulness of habit which rendered untenable the idea of prancing about

battle-fields on a charger. Nor did he quite see himself leading his men with a wave of the wanghee. He was quite ready to be blown-up with a convoy of plum and apple, if by consenting to the sacrifice he could advance his country's cause. He disliked the idea of annihilation as much as a better man, but what he chiefly feared was the ridiculous. Private Hanmer of the Manchester Rifles had known no such fear. He was cast in more heroic mould, and until repeated attacks of trench-fever put him out of it, as happy as a sand-boy.

Oliver took his seat in the *rapide*, and unthinkingly thrust his legs between those of an irascible little oil merchant from Tarascon, who threw at him a glance of fury and a chestful of garlic.

"You are always like that, you English," said this discommoded little ally. "Viz you it is always Vaterloo."

Oliver apologised.

The night passed in one of those embittered discussions about politics which lie so near to the French bosom.

"When the Boche declared war," said a silk merchant from Lyons, "he thought the French were rotten." He threw a defiant glance round the crowded carriage, and added :

"Well, we *are* rotten !"

And acrimony raged till Lyons was reached.

Just below Avignon Oliver was pitch-forked into

a hay-field. Literally into a hay-field, or circle of hay-fields having an eighty-mile radius. And for four eternities—years as men measure Time—did he make hay into neat little packages, and despatch it to armies in the field, and account for it, and for despatching it. Four inhuman years, void of intercourse with his kind save such specimens as a War Office, prone to the most unnatural selections, chose for his companionship. Decent, honest fellows, heads of successful business concerns, with loathing of art and artists in their bones.

God ! how Oliver sickened of that smiling land, the perpetual sunshine, the interminable *cri-cri* of the cicada, the white roads stretching to a horizon eventless as a convict's. Of the ineffable Roman monuments, of the statue of Mistral, with his week-end bag and umbrella. Of the Gruyère-coloured façades of the houses, the pastry-faced players of dominoes in the cafés, those insipid Bocks. Of the "circle" whose members were steeped in olive-oil to the marrow of their wits, of M. le Maire who posed for his beard, and the rich landowners who carefully cultivated their little-finger nails. Of the young men of good family who caressed their *bobos* and discussed their conquests in public. Of the midinettes who were offended that Oliver did not annoy them in the police or indiscretionary sense, of the married women who saw no charm in virtue unassailed, of the ladies of the Chat Noir whose health demanded a bi-

weekly drive in a closed carriage. Of Marseilles and "Aline's." Of the workers at the *poudrerie* and those curious French colonials half-way between the negro and the Chinaman. Of those funerals which in France seem to occur more often, and are certainly more showily conducted, than seems quite decent.

Oliver had to attend three of these functions in his official capacity as a British officer. One was the interment of a local dealer in hay whom, in its bargaining, the British Government had not noticeably worsted. Another was that of a Corsican *en surcis*. This was a terrible case. The fellow had been the champion fencer of a regiment of Zouaves and shockingly wounded at Mons. His heart had been literally dislodged, and whenever he laughed at all zestfully he came near to fainting. When the Spanish Influenza overtook him his heart could not do its job. He had to sit up to draw breath. There were sore places round his mouth and eyes. It was very hot and the flies were troublesome. Oliver watched the doctor give a hypodermic injection to the dying man, using as much care against extraneous infection as though the fellow had been going to live. The Corsican gave Oliver a message for his mistress, a waitress in a café.

"Tell Angèle, *mon capitaine*, how much better I am. Ask her. . . ."

His heart burst, a great gush of blood choked him and he fell back.

An hour later his body was laid in the hospital mortuary, which was also the wood-shed. In everything which concerns death the French are of an impropriety hardly to be paralleled.

The third putting away was that of the proprietress of the wretched little Hôtel de l'Univers where Oliver lodged. Poor woman! Mariette had been pretty once—you saw that despite the tide of flesh which had overcome her like a dropsy. She was enormous, always outrageously *décolletée*, and waddled about her dining-room with the remnants of grace. So a sylph in the last stage of elephantiasis. She had a sense of humour, had Mariette. A British General, lunching on some visit of inspection, had said to her in that exquisite jargon reserved for higher ranks :

“Mariette, moi donner dix louis, vous promener tout nu, moi marcher derrière, taper vous avec ma canne.”

And Mariette had dropped him a disconcerting, “Je le veux bien, mon Général !”

In each case the utmost horror of funerary rites had been achieved. The horses which dragged the hearse were steeped in woe as low as to the pasterns; the coffin was painted and varnished on three sides only, to save the expense of the under-side which was hardly seen; the front ranks of the mourners were conscious, as they walked, of the thinness of the wood. The priests, unwashed and unshaven, their lace soiled as

boarding-house antimacassars, gabbled their Latin without intention, and sprinkled the bier with something that looked like a decayed tooth-brush. Over each shallow grave the Mayor spoke an oration which proceeded out of the fulness not of his heart but of his vocabulary. The earth was hastily shovelled in, and the body left in the torrid, Provençal earth, the funeral party then spreading itself among the little chairs of the Café du Dernier Trou. And Oliver realised that of the dead there would be no more question on this earth save, at a later date, at the mass for the getting-out of the mourning and the erection of the little shrine of tin or iron enclosing a photograph of the departed in the horror of Sunday finery. On the evening of Mariette's funeral Oliver attended a party at the Mayor's. That functionary enlivened the later hours of his entertainment by delivery of a song for which he was famous throughout the department. Its burden was the philosophical

“ Ah, qu'ils sont heureux,
Les chats et les chiens,
Ils font pipi, caca, dans la rue-e,
Personne ne leur dit rien.”

Oliver went to bed humming this refrain and thinking of that hole in the cemetery near-by.

If the summer is unbearable in Provence the winter is merciless. It is then that the mistral blows and the little squares are deserted save for whirling leaves.

Each winter the villagers declare : This is the first time for twenty years that the fountain has frozen ! For two years Oliver had heard them say this. For two years he had sat in his office at the Hôtel de l'Univers despatching the bales of hay which he had stored up against the winter season ; his life was hay, hay, more hay, hay and yet again hay. None who has not laboured in this monotony can know how much one bale resembles another ; they are as indistinguishable as the leading articles in the *Feudal Times*.

Oliver's consciousness was as much stifled with hay as the mouths of the dead are stopped with dust. It was obvious despite the crowings of the *Petit Marseillais* that the war could never end, that he must sit in that office or in this café—the Café du Forum—for the remainder of his days. To bear privation in truck, dug-out or open field was one thing ; to be surrounded by a mockery of civilisation was another. To be compelled to accept Mayoral invitations to dinner, to be offered, as an apéritif, glutinous port, to smoke French cigars, to listen to interminable discussion of two themes—oil and hay, hay and oil—this was not in any sense to be alive.

And now I come to the episode of Marie-Jeanne, which I shall tell in a few words.

Marie-Jeanne was the daughter of a farmer whose regiment was at Verdun. When Oliver first saw her

she was fifteen, the equivalent in that Southern country of Rosie's seventeen. As she stood in the yard of the little *mas*, or farm, her hands on her hips, the toe of her outstretched foot balancing an old list slipper as it were an argument, her whole body drinking in the discussion as to the price of their harvest, Oliver knew that he had never before beheld any human creature quite so exquisitely beautiful.

Here the difficulty of description besets me. Shall I tell you that Marie-Jeanne was tall for her years? Would you like to hear that she was, as an old-fashioned novelist might put it, very graceful in her deportment, her features classically regular as became one of Phœnician descent, with dark blue eyes and luxuriant chestnut hair, her form beautifully defined, lacking only the development of mature growth to constitute its perfection of mould? Or would you have her snub-nosed, freckled, with large and lustrous hazel eyes, fringed with lashes sweeping her cheeks? Take your choice.

Here the reader, who has been spoiled by Freud and the woman-novelist, demurs.

"But surely," she will cavil—obtuse man would waive the point—"surely your heroine's psychology must vary with her looks. It *must* matter whether she is dark or fair, round-faced or oval."

To which my answer is that it *mustn't* matter anything of the sort. It is I who am writing

this book and not the reader, who is at liberty to drop it as quickly as she pleases. Still, since an author may as well be helpful as not, let me make matters easier by declaring that the psychology of the Rosies and the Marie-Jeannes doesn't matter. If they had a mind the Olivers wouldn't be attracted. What the artist wants is not an intellect to grapple with but a heart to use and, possibly, break. He needs his brains for his work, not for his woman. Who does not know the would-be intellectual wife, that tireless stimulant, "helpful," brightly nagging? The really clever woman makes no parade of her intellect until she is of an age to decline upon old lace and scandal. It is just because Marie-Jeanne is meant for no more than an exquisite vessel containing nothing in particular that I leave her choice of colouring to the reader.

Experience teaches, they say; but not when the pupils are artists, adventurers, amorists, sentimentals, fools and Olivers. For two years he withstood the child's extraordinary charm, her flower-like hands, her dimpled arms brown to the elbow and snowy where the sun had not attained, her mouth like running water, her halo'd hair. This was a face for which he would have been content to bundle hay for yet another thousand years.

The acquaintance grew and ripened almost without Oliver willing it. As he rattled past her mother's little farm in his old Army car he would see her in

a sun-bonnet seated upon the old gleaning-machine and guiding Pierre, the decrepit horse, about the autumnal field. Perhaps his car would go that way a little oftener than was necessary. A.S.C. chauffeurs are not fools. And Oliver would return to that wretched Hôtel de l'Univers, and indite some nonsensical report which G.H.Q. would duly take down as evidence against him.

Once a tabbed and braided magnifico, sitting in Marseilles, was startled in his reading of Oliver's computation of trucks to be despatched in the month of October by the following, added in pencil and a mood of abstraction :

"Tout reposait dans Ur et dans Jérimadeth ;
Les astres émaillaient le ciel profound et sombre ;
Le croissant fin et clair parmi ces fleurs de l'ombre
Brillait à l'occident, et Ruth se demandait,

"Immobile, ouvrant l'œil à moitié sous ses voiles,
Quel dieu, quel moissonneur de l'éternel été
Avait, en s'en allant, négligemment jeté
Cette faucille d'or dans le champ des étoiles."

Oliver received in reply a laconic :

"Allusion Ur and Jérimadeth not understood. Are these farms in the Bouches-du-Rhône, please ? A list of French personnel engaged on hay-presses will be forwarded Officer Commanding Supplies Purchase Department, Paris. Scythes will be returned."

"The fellow's mad," said the Colonel, who, after putting his initials to his reprimand with gusto,

resumed his telephonic conversation anent the expected arrival of a hay-boat. The French naval authority made sense, it is to be hoped, of the following, couched in a strong Doric accent :

“ Disez-moi, admiral ; ey-ce-que le bar-toe pour les foings est along-seed ? Je veux dire : ate-eel arrivey ? ”

For two years this little affair of Oliver's went on without attaining momentum beyond that of an amourette. For this there were two reasons—English decency and French decorum. Both Marie-Jeanne and her mother knew perfectly *où elles en étaient*. There was no question of a successful attack upon their prudence. Oliver did not know this. What he did know was that no attack would be made. He was, so to speak, “ up against ” *Adam Bede*. He had read that masterpiece in his tenth year, and had never afterwards “ seen ” himself in the unheroic rôle of seducer. One day when, at the little tables of the Café du Forum, he had made lengthy exposition of his views of the meanness of seduction, a French officer had smiled and said :

“ Bébé ! prends une cerise ! ”

But there it was.

The situation was trebly impossible. He could not take Marie-Jeanne to England as his—shade of Mrs. Henry Wood—lawfully-affianced bride. Marie-Jeanne in Manchester, bargaining with Mr. Kendal or Mr. Milne for a yard of flannelette. Or—since he would

be a poor man when, if ever, the war was over—haggling with a Bloomsbury lodging-house keeper about the price, freshness and method of cooking English eggs. Oliver remembered an English comedy in which the hero had promised a slip of a girl that she would look exquisite sixty years hence, and that he proposed to love her more in December than he did in May. The remark had “gone down” extraordinarily well with the audience, Englishmen in the theatre being sovereignly susceptible to untruth. The smallest gnat of what *is*, and they choke; whole camels of falsity, and they lick their lips for more. But Oliver did not propose to worship Marie-Jeanne in any state or condition other than her present one. Their little talks on farm matters—Pierre’s irritability if you went behind him too suddenly, the probability of a third crop, the new litter of pigs—charmed him, as did the pattern of Marie-Jeanne’s cotton frocks, the texture of her skin, the quality of her smile. She could read but, she confessed, preferred to sew; and one day Oliver discovered that of her trousseau, laid up against the advent of the perfectly probable he—doubtless some neighbouring boor—she had already accumulated half a dozen pairs of sheets, pillow-slips and bolster-cases. In Provence love is considered to be in its proper place between the covers of a book—one must be practical in all things, but most of all in marriage. No, Oliver could never marry the little

thing. In ten years she would resemble her mother. Madame Buisson, upon marriage, had at once assumed the dignity of wifedom without putting off the virginal, and Oliver boggled at the thought of the good woman in complaisance.

Yes, it was quite impossible that he should marry Marie-Jeanne. Also it was agreed between himself, his conscience and his recollections of *Adam Bede*, that there should be no nonsense. The obvious thing was that he should space out his visits and let the nonsensical friendship bleed to death, which, again, was impossible. He really did want Marie-Jeanne, he longed for her day and night, more particularly by day. Nature's trick is to pretend to the victim of passion that he is suffering from anything else—say a distillation of purest sentiment.

Oliver knew this perfectly well, knew that to "deceive" Marie-Jeanne was the only way to undeceive himself.

Let not the reader's heart beat for this little French innocent; she is in no danger. Granite is yielding in comparison with this child's sense of prudence. With her mother close at hand, in the house or about the farm, she would put up her mouth to be kissed readily enough or yield her soft and fragrant little palm. But on those rare occasions when the arrival of the English car coincided with her mother's absence at market, Marie-Jeanne would retreat to an upper

room, lock the door of the house and remain hid.

One day a preposterous incident occurred. The son of a neighbouring small-proprietor came home on leave. His regiment also was at Verdun, and from time to time Louis Pellégrin and Buisson had found occasion to meet. Pellégrin was a lout, neither more nor less ; in peace-time he spent his evenings quarrelling in the café over cards and *petits verres*, or in cadging, unsuccessfully, since he wanted them gratis, for the favours of the ladies at the *Chat Noir*. But since Louis was an only son, his father rich, and his father's land richer still, Buisson looked upon him with a highly favourable eye as a future son-in-law. Louis considered Marie-Jeanne to be sufficiently beautiful to compensate for the fact that the hay at *Mas Buisson* was undoubtedly second quality. Besides, Buisson was supposed to be worth, at a moderate computation, between eighty and a hundred thousand francs. It was to be considered.

And, considering it, Pellégrin did not like the look of Oliver. Unfortunately, for himself, he made the one mistake that counts.

Master Louis Pellégrin became impudent, and was at once persuaded to sleep on it, as the boxing reporters say. The A.S.C. chauffeur had stood by to see fair play, to catch the Frenchman's foot as soon as it should be drawn back to kick. (Jenkins was an admirable second in affairs of dishonour. Roundly accused by Oliver

of being too "thick" with the wife of a French officer at the front, he had replied: "Not thick, Sir, not thick. I'm what they call out here her 'maîtresse'." In two rounds Louis went down to a hefty right-arm jolt, retaining sufficient of consciousness to pretend to its loss. Marie-Jeanne bathed his wounds and scolded the Englishman prettily enough. It is possible that this display of vigour roused her to a greater pitch of admiration than all Oliver's tender hints and whispered recollections of Lamartine. At any rate she wished she had been Louis.

Peace was patched up, and the lout went back to Verdun, to whisper to Buisson of an English officer who "faisait la cour à sa femme."

Every Frenchman is a Leontes whether he likes his Hermione not. Strong in Buisson's breast was the passion of property. His wife was his, just as much as and no more than his horse, his *récolte*, his two *charettes*, his *mas* and the furniture thereof. Neighbours had written him of Oliver's visits, had warned him that Marie-Jeanne "n'était plus un enfant, si toutefois c'est pour elle que l'anglais vient, comme il le prétend."

He had replied, "Ma femma ouvrira l'oeil!"

One of them, le père Bafouin, had returned, "Elle ouvrirait les deuz, que peut-être tu n'y verrais rien! Ta femme en a de beaux!"

And so set Buisson thinking.

A fortnight later Oliver received a letter with the Verdun post-mark. It began, "Sachez, Monsieur le Capitaine anglais, que si les montagnes ne se rencontrent pas, les hommes se rencontrent !"

Four closely-written pages they were, written on that abominable French note-paper with a sloping hand, vile pen and rusty ink. They were hardly coherent—the sort of thing a man might be spurred to at that distance, and at that time. This French soldier did not know whether he would ever see again the wife of whom he was jealous ; his leave was not for another six weeks, even supposing he survived their ordeal ; he could but threaten. One sentence alone moved Oliver, and it ran : "J'ai cru quand j'avais ma permission il y a quatorze mois que vous faisiez les doux yeux a ma fille. Mais je me suis dit—Marie-Jeanne est un enfant et le Capitaine est un officier anglais qui ne nous fera pas de mal. Et je me suis tu."

In reply Oliver wrote a careful, reasoned, and I think a gallant letter. He avowed a tenderness for Marie-Jeanne, declared its increasing strength, swore that he had spoken no dishonest word and vowed that he would utter none. He begged leave to continue the acquaintance since, if an end ever did come to the war, he might then be in a position to make a definite proposal of the most honourable nature. Marie-Jeanne was still a child and he engaged to treat her like a child. For Madame Buisson he

entertained the most extravagant respect, whilst of Buisson himself he was the humble servitor.

He did not know that while he was writing the letter Buisson was already dead.

As Oliver sallied forth to pay his visit of condolence at the *mas* Buisson, a peremptory order came over the telephone that he must report at Marseilles under three hours with all his kit. Lieut. Boshington-Ormerod, now on his way, would take over. Three days later Oliver landed in Algiers with a majority and title of O.C. Dates. Was it chance, the happy interposition of a Colonel not quite such a fool as he looked—no Colonels ever are—or the convenient fancy of a War Office? Whichever it was, there is no denying that the powers that were managed Oliver's retreat skilfully enough, if they bungled some others. He never saw Marie-Jeanne from that day to this. Nor has he ever mentioned her to Jerry.

The novelist has another privilege besides that of drawing a veil. He can also lift a curtain. Marie-Jeanne married six months after the Armistice. The lucky fellow was a bank-clerk from Aix, and the couple have since enjoyed the peculiar happiness reserved for these useful, if humdrum, members of society. M. Pellégrin père dying some months earlier, his son led Mme. Vve. Buisson to the altar on the same day that her daughter and the bank-

clerk were by law made one in body, remaining two in possessions. The two farms go admirably together. The yield of the *mas* Pellégrin was always one of 200,000 kilos first quality, that of the *mas* Buisson 80,000 kilos second quality. The yield of the combined farms is 260,000 best and 20,000 inferior—or so Louis manages to persuade the merchants. So perhaps he is not such a lout after all.

Both households are exceedingly happy. There is never any mention of the Englishman.

CHAPTER VI

“ ARCH ”

WHEN, less than seven months after the armistice, Oliver left the War Office, a free man with a Protection Certificate in his pocket, his first job was to call on his Army bankers. The reader will remember that he emerged from his partnership with Trion & Venture with the sum of £900. He calculated that with the addition of small savings and his gratuity, he was worth twelve hundred pounds.

“ And a bit over,” verified the clerk.

“ Enough for lunch ? ”

“ That depends, sir. Your exact balance, with your gratuity, amounts to one thousand two hundred and seven pounds five shillings and tenpence.”

“ Thank you,” said Oliver.

“ Thank *you*, sir,” said the clerk.

Oliver made further calculations. He decided that Jerry and he could lunch anywhere within reason, and still leave intact the round sum of twelve hundred.

Good old Jerry ! He had not seen him since '16,

when his friend had, as he expressed it, “ got out of it, a bit crocked, but nothing to matter.”

Jerry was always a poor fist at letter-writing, and had given him no more precise indication of what had been happening to him than that he was “ doing all right.” With an Englishman this may mean a peerage, or thirty bob a week.

Oliver turned the corner of Panton Street, walked quickly up the Haymarket, crossed to the left and there, in the doorway of the Tube, stood the old Jerry. Paler and thinner than he used to be, but still Jerry. There was splendid greeting.

Over their cocktails the two young men squabbled amicably as to which should be host.

“ I’m making pots of money,” said Jerry.

“ I’ve got bags of it,” countered Oliver.

“ I’ve been home longer. You’re a visitor ! ”

“ I’m your officer ! ”

I shall not say much about the lunch, which Sheldon insisted should be at the Lonsdale, except that it would have highly offended the gastronomic critic of the *Plantagenet*. Naturally, therefore, its items somewhat astonished the suave head-waiter who hovered discreetly about their chairs, and issued unnecessary instructions to his minions.

“ Rotten place for food, France,” said Jerry.

“ Messy. Don’t know what’s good. Let’s have a G.R. lunch.”

“ What’s a G.R. ? ”

"You know. George Robey. Solid, substantial and thick. Steak and onions, Stilton, stout."

"We shall eat 'to our hunger' as the good Provençals have it."

Oliver recalled the waiter and desired him to change the chicken for a châteaubriand.

"Monsieur will remember that the soup and fish are already a trifle heavy."

"Are we eating this lunch, Garibaldi, or are you?"

The Italian shrugged his shoulders, smiled and indulged in inward reflections on the manners of the English.

"We'll have a treacle roly-poly, a magnum of Roederer, some bottled asparagus—and you don't need to pretend it's fresh, Garibaldi—a bottle of decent port, some Corona Coronissimas, no liqueurs and no fal-lals. Tell the band to make as little row as possible, and that if they play the Barcarolle from Hoffmann I shall walk out. And at three o'clock precisely, à trois heures précises, bring me what Swinburne would call "the milkless cost."

"Bien, m'sieu."

"That gives us two hours, Jerry. It's good to see your old snub-nose again. Now tell me the news. Married?"

"Do I *look* married?"

"Dirty dog?"

"Dirty dog."

Which was, of course, perfectly untrue. But that's our English way.

Now I am not going to punctuate the conversation which ensued with such impediments as :

“ . . . ” said Oliver, helping himself to some more parsley butter.

“ . . . ” returned Jerry, knocking the ash off his cigar.

These things are a bore, and the reader must take them for granted.

I shall skip, too, those commonplaces which are the necessary lobbies and antichambers of good talk, and go straight on to Jerry's :

“ So you see, Noll, I was pretty well broke. The old firm was jiggered, gone 'phut. And there was I, up in Manchester, an unwanted estate-agent and auctioneer. I could auction all right ; nobody better. ‘ Any advance on this exquisite toilet set ? Chaste design. Complete *with* handles ! Positively giving it away, ladies and gentlemen. No reserve, absolutely no reserve, I assure you. Any advance. *And* sixpence ? Thank you, Sir ! ’ ”

“ The technique's all right.”

“ Yes, but the letters weren't. I hadn't qualified and I'd got to the end of my gratuity. They'd given me a lump sum for the rheumatic fever, or whatever it was, and I'd done that in too. To cut a long story short I spent last Easter in Chepstow workhouse.”

Oliver grinned.

“ They could keep their hot cross buns, I suppose ? ”

“ Pre-cisely. Well, I answered advertisements—hadn’t the cash to stick any in myself—and . . . philosophised. There was only one job I ever got a smell at, and that was to sell grand pianos to South Wales miners on commission. But they wanted £100 security. I spent my last five bob on a stock of stamps before I went in. It doesn’t really look well to apply for a job in an envelope marked ‘ 2d. to pay.’ Or is it 4d. now ?—I forget. They called the place by a fancy name—Mount Pleasant—so the address was all right.”

“ And yet they say the English have no imagination ! ”

“ From what I could gather there wasn’t a job going in the whole of this sweet country. They’d started to shut down the munition factories. I didn’t want to descend to pot-boy or second footman straight away, and I’d always hated the idea of selling gloves behind a counter. Well, in there I ran up against a fellow who used to be in my lot—Muggridge, Archie Muggridge. He isn’t much to look at, about five foot nothing, physique like a rabbit, ears like a bat. He got his ticket about a month before I did—heart all wrong and plenty of shell-shock, some of it real. Has no people, and doesn’t get enough food to have any vices. No tastes unless you count beer and fags. Is probably a Cockney—anyhow, knows London pretty

well. Thinks he was born at Grays, but isn't sure. A Hyde Park rat. You know the sort.”

Oliver nodded.

“ I have never been able to make out what Archie's proper job is. Don't think he has one really. ‘ Newspapers ? ’ I asked him once. ‘ Sometimes. ’ ‘ Alexandra Park ? ’ ‘ Done a bit nahna gyne. ’ Window-cleaning ? ‘ On an orf. ’ Errand-boy ? ‘ Might er bin. ’ Once he asked me if I knew a cheap place to get some tattoo-marks removed. ‘ Elps 'em ter reckernise yer. ’ ”

“ That was rather pathetic. ”

“ I don't think Arch bothers his head much about pathos. His view is that he had them put on one night when he was drunk, and that they have been a nuisance ever since. ‘ Wot you torfs calls a 'andi-cap. ’ Well, I happen to know that Archie is, at bottom, a pretty good sort. I'm not going to say that he saved my life, or cared for anybody else's skin except his own. But we were in one or two tightish places together, and he was all right. Arch took up with me because, although I was declared ‘ a cut above him, ’ I didn't use ‘ no swank. ’ I liked him. Well, we chummed up again, and after a time had a good holy row about something—I forget what. Anyhow, I licked him, made him shake hands, and gave him the worst of my two spare shirts. He said as he washed his mug—and I'd made it look pretty ugly—‘ W'y the 'ell didn't cher s'y yer was

coddin' ? I wouldn't 'ave givin' yer no lip if I 'adn't thought as yer was tryin' to take a rise ahter me.' He explained afterwards that he always *thought* I was a toff. Then he said something about 'torfs' never letting on that they could use their mits until they had to."

"Cads," said Oliver, "are peculiarly susceptible to class. I remember Noel Parish telling me how, one day when he was sheltering under the portico of the Ritz in a peculiarly atrocious pair of bags, an old golf jacket, and a shabby cap, a policeman tried to move him on.

" 'Damn your eyes,' said Noel, and Robert touched his helmet, begged Noel's pardon and said he didn't know he was a gentleman till he spoke."

"That's just like Noel," said Jerry, "I suppose he gave the fellow half a crown ?"

"You're wrong, and so was the policeman. That's what *he* supposed. But go on about Archie."

The remainder of Jerry's story took about an hour to tell. The essentials were these. He and Arch stuck it for a few weeks in and out of the casual ward or the workhouse, hoping against hope. Then one day Jerry said :

"If work won't come to us, we must go to where work is."

"Op it, d'jer mean ? W'ere to ?" asked Arch.

"London."

“ They’ll cop me agyne.”

“ Will they hell as like ! ”

“ I’ll risk it,” said Arch, “ I’m gyme.”

Jerry never knew what Archie’s peccadillo had been, or whether he was really “ wanted.” He was probably just shy of the police in a general sort of way.

They set out to tramp it. Jerry had not the least idea why he stuck to Arch or Arch to him, but he believed that Arch thought him no end of a fine chap ever since he had given him that licking. Arch was always wanting to do little things for him, and of course Jerry got up some sort of protective notion. Anyhow it seemed settled that wherever he went Arch went also.

Of course Jerry had not one-tenth of the talent for tramping that Muggridge showed. He did not find that his experience in the army helped much. Out there, rations were always coming up more or less, and there was no particular shame about sleeping in a ditch, but he found sleeping under an English hedge slightly sordid, and he could never make himself quite at home in another man’s barn.

“ There’s a technique in tramping that I couldn’t quite master,” he said.

“ It’s quite simple,” replied Oliver. “ You’ve only got to pick up any illustrated paper to see a portrait of Mr. Bosher, and an account of how he wagered that he would start to walk from Torquay in his vest and pants, and arrive at Perth in a suit of broad cloth

and a silk hat without having begged. 'He won his wager,' it always ends."

"Well, I should invariably arrive stark naked," said Jerry. "People in the country don't want their windows or their boots or knives cleaned; or if they do, they do it themselves. Independent, I call 'em. Respectable farmers' wives fought shy of me. 'You've no business to be doing this, young man,' they used to say severely, and slam the door. But Arch was different. If there was a job wanted doing, or a pie finishing, he could wheedle it out of them. He seemed to remind half the mothers in England of their own sons."

But whatever his difficulties, Jerry got along somehow, and would have been all right but for the English spring. It was May, and one wet night, just outside Andover, he went down with pneumonia and influenza. Arch got him to hospital, where he stayed for ten weeks. It was a bad case. Every evening for a month the boy called to inquire after him, and once he left a bunch of flowers. Arch was in some sort of a job, it appeared, but he was not too articulate about it. Anyhow he appeared pretty spry, and his collar was almost clean. As soon as Jerry was fit to leave hospital, Archie turned up with two railway tickets for London and four pounds. Jerry asked him where he got them.

"Don't you arst nuffink," the boy said. "This is my ticket and that's yourn, and 'arf o' four quid is tew

quid. An' if yer makes a fuss I'll punch yer 'ead, Mister Jerry, and I can do it this time.”

When they arrived in London they took a room in Hugh Street, Victoria, at ten shillings a week, and having already shared a hedge Jerry did not mind sharing a bed. And although he had not done much to clean up Archie's mind, he had made him wash. It was a beastly place—plaster coming off the walls in chunks, and a general air of squalid indecency. Fortunately there was a lock on the door so that their clothes were not stolen.

They calculated that they could last in this hole for about three weeks,—living carefully. Archie earned a few shillings here and there, which helped ; but Jerry drew horribly blank. A row or two at the Labour Exchanges did not help matters very much. Jerry was not one to put up with impertinence.

Once he met a man he had known in France and had not particularly liked. The man insisted on standing him a drink, which went to his head and he collapsed on the floor. A doctor in the bar said : “ That's not drink. That's want of food.”

Jerry had to admit that his way of looking for work, though more methodical than Archie's, was not half so successful. Archie would generally come home with a few shillings, though he would never tell how he made them. Probably he directed old gentlemen to railway stations, or carried bags ; but Jerry, being educated, thought it proper to go to work in the

classical, hopeless way. He had already proved at Chepstow that writing for jobs was no good ; besides he had no more money for stamps. At first he walked every morning to the Tate Library in South Lambeth Road and scoured the advertisements. After he had been doing this for a week he had the sense to think of going to the newspaper offices and reading the papers there. It was more central. He began with the big papers,—the *Feudal Times* and that sort of thing. Jerry was so innocent that he thought there was most likelihood of finding an educated job there, but, instead, he found that our aristocracy is not only entirely self-sufficient but that it is always wanting to shelve somebody. Instead of My Lord being in need of a secretary, his one desire is to recommend his chauffeur-valet. The “ Situations Vacant ” column in the *Feudal Times* made him furious. He learnt from them, for example, that well-bred ladies still have what he called the “ cheek ” to insist in print that their maids shall be Protestants. Once he wrote after a job, and was nearly engaged as “ Parlourmaid—ex-service man not objected to.” His prospective mistress had decided that he was satisfactory if he did not want “ followers ” and was not a Roman Catholic. Stretching his hands towards her stringy throat he had said, “ Madam, I am a Thug ! ” It was touch and go, he told Oliver. Bexhill-on-Sea was within an ace of losing a highly-respected harridan, brought up in the Church of

England and mockery of God. However, the old lady thought that he “wouldn’t quite suit,” and gave him his return fare as stipulated.

After that Jerry tried the small papers which, of course, were full of jobs he could not do. He knew nothing about tripe-dressing, for instance, though he was willing to learn. He could not conscientiously describe himself as a “bodybuilder with or without mate,” a “bricklayer experienced in overhand buildings,” a “cabinet-maker well up in Sheraton bedroom suites,” a “coach trimmer for high-grade landaulettes,” or a “fishmonger to fry and assist in yard.” Indeed, there was a whole alphabet of things which he could not do. In spite of being an auctioneer he was what is called a “gent,” and a gent on his beam-ends is the one thing this world has no use for. And perhaps it is right.

He found himself developing the “unemployed complex.” There were whole June days when he would loll in the park, lean over the railings, spit, and compute the space between Lady Billingsgate’s buttocks and her saddle, both of which he deemed to be the best variety of pig-skin. Or he would lounge along Bond Street, and rehearse tirades about women with too many Orient pearls and their sisters with too little Smithfield food.

He made friends with a street musician whose living lay in *A che la morte* performed on a ‘cello with two strings and a horn like a gramophone trumpet. The

fellow was an artist. He had all the fire and passion of the best Italian opera singers, and made the decrepit tune sound a new thing. Jerry knew that Verdi was rubbish; he knew that nobody who has a friend who is acquainted with a man whose brother-in-law rents half a studio in Chelsea would dream of maintaining anything else, but strangely enough he could never get musical experts to explain to him why this "rubbish" should stir him so strongly. The street musician sat on a stool in the gutter, between the bonnet of a Rolls Royce and a Carter Paterson nosebag. Thrilled by his own playing, he was of the brotherhood of artists who, said Jerry, are of two kinds—those who live in garrets, and those who live in gutters. He did not believe there were any other sort.

"Show me a poet who possesses a mahogany dining-table," he said, "and I'll show you a traitor who has sold his art to some devil of a publisher or even of a public."

"Hear, hear," threw in Oliver, "quite the literary touch!"

"I knew you'd think so. I remembered that from an article I made out of the chap, and got three guineas for. It began with me pretending to be on the way to my Bridge club, and ended with something about a conscientious artist being unable to live if he is not also a good card-holder. That article kept me and Archie for the best part of a month. But there

were times when I wanted to smash windows, and even hated the beautiful things inside. . . .”

“ Why didn’t you write me all this, you old fool ? ” asked Oliver.

“ I ’as me pride, old thing. I made up my mind not to write till things were better, and I didn’t. I’m coming to that.”

Although Archie was as straight as a die with him, yet Jerry did not quite trust the lad. He felt that at heart he was a blackguard, or rather, that he was human and natural like everybody else. The world had never of its own free will given Arch a chance, so he had just to take such opportunities as it let slip.

One night Arch came home late. Jerry, in bed and half asleep, saw him put his hand in his jacket-pocket, draw something out and slip it under the pillow. In the morning he asked him what it was.

“ Orl right, ol’ eoek,” the boy replied. “ There ain’t no ’urry. It’s arf-an’-arf between us tew, and I ain’t goin’ to let eher dahn. We’ve struek lucky fer onee. Let’s ’ave breakfus fust, and then we’ll see ’ow much it’s werf.”

He made Jerry promise not to lift his pillow and went out, apparently to spend a small fortune, since he came back with kippers, bacon, a pot of marmalade, two packets of “ Woods,” and a large Players for Jerry, who cursed him for his extravagance.

"We're orl right," he said, "made fer life. I won't arf make 'er squeal."

Naturally Jerry was impatient and a shade anxious. "Get a move on, Arch," he said.

"I tell yer we've come inter inderpendent means," was the retort. "So watcher 'urry?"

At last Arch pushed back his chair, and after putting on a fag with extreme deliberation, made a dive under the pillow.

"I foun' that lars' night," he said, showing a lady's bag in gold net.

"Where?"

"In A'bemarle Street. A tart dropped it jus' as she got aht of 'er taxi. Married she is too. It were abaht ten o'clock. Rum time some of vem lydies chooses fer visitin'. Lydies! you'd fink they was no better'n bloomin' 'ores! There's a block of flats there—bach'ler chambers they calls 'em. Bin there meself scores o' times—useter work at a flaher-shop, an' 'ad ter take a bloke wot lived in the block flahers fer 'is rooms w'enever 'e was expectin' 'is bit o' fluff. A married woman she wer too, 'is servant told me, but 'e cud never git to know 'er name no 'ow, though 'e tried all manner of wys of findin' aht. Mrs. 'Obson she called herself, but that wern't 'er reel nyme. This ain't the same woman, of course; nor it ain't the same bloke neiver, cos it's the next 'ahse. I wish it were the same, I cud manage 'im orl right. He'd no guts, 'e 'adn't, not by wot 'is servant told me, an' yer

eud 'a got orl 'e 'ad aht of 'im easy, same as drawrin' a rabbit."

"In any ease, how are you going to find out who the man is? You don't know which flat the lady went to. How do you know she's a married woman? And anyway what about it?"

At which Archie looked the sewer rat to perfection. Really evil.

"I dunno w'ieh flat the tart was goin' ter visit," he said slowly, "but I do 'appen ter know wot 'er nyme is, an' w'ere she lives, and I'm tellin' yer she's married."

This began to look serious, and Jerry at once made Archie open the bag and turn the contents out on to the bed. These were a small and beautifully made pair of opera-glasses with a monogram in brilliants, a silver seent-bottle, two very fine handkerchiefs, a small gold box containing powder and puff, a programme of the Haymarket theatre, two five-pound notes, two ten-shilling notes, some loose silver and copper and an ivory eard-case containing half-a-dozen cards. Roughly, if the brilliants were even moderately good, Jerry estimated the value of the whole lot to be anything up to one hundred and fifty pounds.

"You'll get twenty-five per cent. out of this from Scotland Yard," he told Archie. "Say twenty quid reward at the least. You're a made man. You can start in a business."

"Business my eye," replied Archie. "I look like callin' on Scotland Yard, I don't fink! 'Ow's Mr.

Bloody Inspector this mornin' ? Blimy, yus ! I kin see meself callin' on 'im ! ”

“ You can't sell the stuff,” said Jerry, “ because I won't be a party to it. So perhaps you'll tell me what you intend to do with it ? ”

“ The stuff's nothing,” Archie said with an air of really magnificent disdain, “ I told yer we was independent *fer life*—fer as long as 'er ladyship lives any'ow. I've got 'er letters.”

And with this he pulled out of his breast-pocket a thick package tied up with ribbon. The handwriting was good and the paper stout and well made.

The rest of the scene appeared to Jerry like the third act of *His House in Order*, although Arch was not in the least like Irene Vanbrugh and he could not flatter himself that he was like George Alexander. Anyhow, they sat on the bed and went through the letters. They were the classical thing, these letters from him to her. She had kept them all, including the answers to invitations, which marked the early part of the acquaintance, and his replies when she had suggested that it would be nice if he would come in for a game of billiards with her husband in the evening. Then there were letters in which he loved her for her soul alone. Jerry got rather tired of reading all this stuff but Arch seemed to find it great fun.

“ 'Ere,” he said, suddenly, “ this is w'ere they done it.”

Yes, it was exactly like Pinero's play. She had written him that the deception was making life a hell upon earth. And he replied that he could understand that she was all broken up, and that it was pretty rough luck for her. Then Arch pointed to a letter, which looked as if it had been cried over, crumpled up, thrown into the fire, and pulled out again.

“This is w'ere 'e begins to git sick of 'er,” Arch said, and he looked the most malignant little devil. The serawl was full of the kind of thing which a man writes when he has had enough—excuses and postponements, something about a lot of work, which she must have known to be lies, and finally one about her reputation. She had obviously thrown herself at him after the event, wanting him to take her away and begin life all over again in Tierra del Fuego, or the middle of South America, or the Indian Ocean; whereas obviously what he wanted, poor chap, was to drop the whole affair and take her out to Ciro's, first once a week, afterwards once a fortnight and so on. Then, Jerry imagined, they had a blazing row, and she had gone to Albemarle Street to have it out with him, let off the usual reproaches and wind up by throwing the letters into his despicable face. Anyhow, she dropped the bag as she was getting out of the taxi, and Arch hopped off with it.

Jerry had a devil of a time with his friend. Like all his lot the boy was at bottom full of class hatred,

and went after a chance of "getting his own back" like a shark after a nigger's leg. He was simply boiling over with a kind of cold spite, and was rather dreadful to look at. Jerry tried him first of all on the decency tack, but that was hopeless. The upper classes were his natural enemies, and if they were such fools as to give him a chance he was not going to be such a fool as to miss it. Jerry appealed to his chivalry even, to that sense of conduct which had nearly won him the V.C., and would have done so but for the fact that they couldn't award the supreme honour to everybody in the army.

"It was orl right savin' ol' 'Iggins," he said "tub, I wouldn't uv done it for a orf'cer."

Then Jerry tried another tack. He told him that they had agreed to go partners till something turned up, and if that something was blackmail he was not jolly well going to be implicated.

"Very well then," was the reply. "Leave it ter me. This is a job as I can do, and you don't need ter know nuffin at all abaht it. I shall drop you your share as per agreement, and if yer don't want it, yer needn't 'ave it."

Then Jerry threatened another licking, but that was no good; so he took the boy out and got him drunk, or, perhaps not drunk, but mellow, and a bit sentimental. He appealed to that side of Arch which made Arch stick to him when he was in hospital, bring him flowers and that sort of thing. Eventually

they agreed upon a compromise which was of Archie's own finding.

“You know,” he said, “what them torfs is like. You go and git wot yer can aht o' them. If I go, they give me a quid or tew quid p'r'aps, an' think they've done the 'andsome thing. But you'll be able to stick 'em fer more.”

One of Archie's ambitions in life was to push a barrow, and that needed capital. It occurred to Jerry that the woman might be good for something luxurious in carts and so start Arch in the fruit line. Possibly he might raise ten or twenty quid. He did not propose to tell her anything at all about Arch unless she forced him to. But if she was going to be mean, he proposed to tell the whole story, and put it to her that for a few pounds she would be very reasonably out of what might have been a nasty mess. In other words, as Oliver pointed out, he proposed to do *en grand seigneur* what Arch had wanted to do in his quality of rat; but it was no time to bandy words. Jerry believed that the only way to inculcate decency into the lower classes is by showing them that decency pays.

He turned up next day at the address on the envelopes, looking as much like a gentleman as a street book-black and an underground wash-and-brush-up could make him. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. He rang the bell and asked for Mrs. Laurie. But his gentility did not get him past

the butler, who said that there was nothing for him, and ordered him to be off. But Jerry was persistent. The butler, reconsidering him, asked his name, and after dividing a doubtful glance between him and the umbrellas, left our friend in the hall trying not to fumble with his cap. He came back in a moment, showed Jerry to the drawing-room and told him that *Mr. Laurie* would see him. This was rather a blow. Jerry had not thought of the husband. Fortunately he had time to take the letters out of the bag and stuff them into one pocket and the bag into the other. That done, he was able to look round. He found it very difficult not to sit on the edge of the chair nearest the door like servants who have come after a situation, and concluded that there must be something of the lackey in most of us, and that the strain is liable to become stronger when one has been "on the road." However he plucked up courage and stood well in the middle of the room. It was quite decently, even tastefully, furnished, although that is no test nowadays. It seems that not only have the big shops a man to help the new-rich choose their furniture, but that they also send another with the sticks to see that they are put in the right places. Yet this room did not look in the least like the Tottenham Court Road. Jerry knew instinctively that gentlepeople lived there.

Then *Mr. Laurie* came in. Seeing at a glance that he had to do with a decent chap, and that there was

going to be no question of bargaining, Jerry pulled the bag out of his pocket and said : “ I believe this belongs to Mrs. Laurie.”

“ My wife has been anxious about a bag which she lost last night,” the other replied. “ May I ask where you found it ? ”

“ Outside the Haymarket Theatre.”

The man seemed to expect this.

“ Mrs. Laurie must have dropped it there,” he said. “ She will be immensely obliged to you for your kindness in returning it. It is indeed very good of you to have taken the trouble.”

Jerry stood up to go, realising that any explanation which he should have to offer to Arch as to how he came to return it for nothing would sound extremely lame. He even wondered whether Arch would not suspect that he had kept the reward for himself. Then his boots caught Mr. Laurie’s eye.

“ Where were you at school ? ” he asked suddenly.

“ Oh, that doesn’t matter,” returned Jerry.

“ Oh, but it does. You see, . . .” And then the man broke off, and altered what he was going to say to “ By the way, how did you know that the bag belonged to my wife ? ”

“ There were some cards in it.”

Mr. Laurie opened the bag and emptied it on to the table.

“ Mrs. Laurie told me that it contained some notes and things of value. She said in fact she was

going to offer a substantial reward." He hesitated, and Jerry had to help him out.

"What you mean is, you think I'm a gentleman and you don't like to offer me anything. I quite understand, but it does so happen that I shan't be, as they say, offended."

It was difficult, but he had to keep Arch in mind. Obviously the old boy did not like the idea of offering cash, and in the circumstances it was cash, and cash only, that he wanted.

"You must really," said Mr. Laurie, "allow me to ask you a few questions."

And so very tactfully and delicately he got Jerry's story out of him, including Chepstow, but omitting Arch.

Finally Mr. Laurie said, "Young man, I've got to a time of life when I can afford to be quixotic; also I am getting old, and as a Member of Parliament I want a secretary. As an employer of labour I realise that the people with the best references generally make the worst scoundrels. But there are some references which don't lie, like the bag on the table."

He there and then offered Jerry a post as his private secretary at three hundred a year, and Jerry came out of the house with a cheque for his first month's salary in his pocket. He found Laurie a decent, sensible fellow in spite of the fact that he was a Member of Parliament. Mrs. Laurie was different, and inclined

to be uppish. Jerry took the first opportunity of giving her back the letters. She guessed that he had read them and of course hated him like poison, but not, he fancied, quite so much as she hated the other man who dined there occasionally, and still came in for a game of billiards with her husband.

“ It’s an unpleasant situation for her, I admit,” said Jerry. “ But she deserves it.”

“ And Arch ? ” asked Oliver.

“ Good as gold. At first he was inclined to cut up rough, but I think he saw that it wasn’t my fault. Of course I offered him half the doings, but he was just as firm upon refusing that as he had been keen on his own dirty little plan. Finally we compromised about the barrow, and I understand he does a roaring trade. For a long time he wouldn’t take any other money from me, but at last, as an ultimate concession, he allowed me to put ten shillings a week in the Post Office Savings Bank for him. Arch still honours me with his friendship, and comes round to my digs one night a fortnight. I won’t live with the Lauries, you know : and Arch won’t have me for a customer. He says that if I ever meet him in the street when I am with anybody I must cut him dead, or he will bung me one in the eye with a banana. And,” Jerry concluded, “ I have taken the greatest care to respect Arch’s social prejudices.”

CHAPTER VII

WHICH SHOULD NOT BE SKIPPED

THERE is a kind of puling æsthete which swarms the *foyers* of our high-brow theatres, and beds itself into London literary life like the beetles in the roof of Westminster Hall. Would that it could be got rid of as easily ! It produces a prurient little book about life at a public-school, a volume of sonnets with as much body as a cheap German hock, a novel about some bright young nymphomaniac, and is, thereafter, impotent. It wears green *suède* shoes to match its soul, and looks, for its Pantheon, to some Unnatural History Museum at South Kensington. *Au fond* it is as little vicious as a piano-tuner.

This is an order to which Oliver did not belong. He was a hard-working practitioner of letters, and laboured at his books with a persistence which only failure knows. Within six months of his meeting with Jerry he had given the world two masterpieces—*Turtle and Jay*, which dealt with luxury among Viscountesses, and *Hell and Bayswater*, a tragedy of life in residential hotels.

These were no more successful than his novels *Gusto* and *Ozymandias : Newspaper Bug*. It would be quixotic to demand that only those who have the power to create should be tormented by the impulse towards creation. Human nature is not built that way. Oliver was an artist to whom the faculty of creation had been denied. Yet that he was an artist, redeemed by his faith rather than by his works, none doubted who knew him. Art is an attitude of mind, and a man may be its profound disciple who does no more than twiddle his thumbs. Art is a delighted looking-on, a drenching of sea and sky and ships and men with the artist's own quality of perception. Grocer conscious of grocer, revelling in his own bankruptcy, in the irrelevant pertinacity of the comic little Receiver, in the cut of his frowzy coat, his ill-fitting dickey, cuffs, and manners—this is the artist.

“To taste life, to have the fine palate is all, your man of success a mere gormandizer,” was a phrase of Oliver's about this period. He was using Jerry as an Aunt Sally for a volume of *Letters to Croesus*. This particular epistle was Number Four.

OLIVER'S LETTER

DEER FRIEND,—I take up my pen to rite these few lines hoping it finds you all kiff as this leeves me at preasant. The grub is rotten and fags is scarce, so enny to come glad of them. Their is no more news so will now pack up. Your luvng chum.—NOLL . . .

That, my dear old boy, is the kind of out-pouring into which you and I have by Army Regulations so often pried. No, not you, for I seem to remember that you never got beyond the "Yessir! Nosir! Clean your boots, fetch you a cab, sir?" stage of soldiering which retired Colonels, surveying the world from a Piccadilly bow-window, regard as the *summum bonum* of low-class condition. "Teaches the cad to forget his gutter. Throws his chest out. Makes a man of him. Gives him self-respect." So these "bronzed and grizzled veterans," grunting themselves out of the smoking-room to read the tape, bully the page-boy and cajole the junior porter. And don't they cower as they pass the man on the door, the ex-sergeant-major who knows exactly how much of their military career has been devoted to arms, and how much to mere hectoring!

All this sounds a bit like rancour and old spite, doesn't it? Well, we've all agreed to forget the old days out there, and pretend they never happened. Unless, of course, some jumped-up, picture-making slut bethinks herself that she hasn't been in the papers lately, and that possibly some of the poor, dear boys may not be having the best of times now they're "home." And off she trots to old Mother Willesden to invite Her Grace to join at a *Matinée*, and shall it be the Jubilee or the Victory Theatre, and can they rely on "the profession," and wouldn't a Sunday afternoon be best, and would Her Grace

prefer a Limbless, Sightless or Shell-shock affair? The relations of Jane Poictiers and Viola, Duchess of Willesden, provide no astonishment for the Londoner. To us, who were brought up in the provinces and suckled by Richard Cobden, they are, to say the least of it, unusual. In this capital city, whose only use for letterpress is apparently to elucidate yesterday's "tragedies"—"Mr. Dobbs, the Fulham Tram-conductor who accidentally swallowed a pair of silver-plated asparagus tongs"—nothing is unusual. In the provinces you would expect two women who, in public, call each other "Jane" and "Viola," to be at least on cordial terms in private. But this is very much not the case with our Duchess and Jane. They are jolly with each other in those places where they meet in the public eye, Covent Garden or the Ritz. It is politic that the heads of two great orders should be in offensive and defensive alliance against the common herd. This is what the politicians mean by "the solidarity of the social fabric." But the private relations of these ladies are made up of thrust and pressure, pull and tension, stress sheer and tangential. Between them the two make a complete *Builder's Journal*. They have never been really friendly since Jane was foisted on the public as an actress. Viola simply cannot understand why a woman who has made a success in one profession should take up another.

I think I ought to warn you, old boy, that I don't

really know any of the nobs with whom this 'ere Lunnon is sprinkled. I've steadily refused to know them, and they have never regretted it. I've scraped acquaintance with the fellow who shaves me, the potman at my pub and its regular customers—a journalist or two, a horse-dealer, a groom from the Royal Mews, some gentlemen's gentlemen, a handful of detrimentals and a broken-down, witless, old man who might be King Lear. It is public property that his two daughters lead an expensive existence in Maida Vale, and allow their father ten shillings a week between them. He distributes leaflets with an admired impartiality—"Christ is Risen!" and "Why Wear a Truss?" My "set" includes the usual "recipients of the dole," getting what glow and comfort they may out of a glass of beer, poor souls, when, of course, they "should be looking for work." Souls, did I say? It's much if you can call them bodies!

Well, the war's over. I have heard some of these chaps say that they will never be happy again. They've had "the time of their lives," and it's all over. Of all the books about the war not one has given the soldier's point of view. "War is a damnable business" our fastidious authors cry, and proceed to depict an unholy shambles. Whereas to many it was a holy bean-feast. I had some talk with a soldier at my pub the other night—a private in the Guards. Originally joining up for "three and nine," he had come through all right, and was now nearing

the end of his time. He had never wanted the tapes. "It means a 'ell of a lot of extra work, and no pay for the first year. A Lancee-Jack in the Guards is the worst rank a bloke can 'old. A guardsman's better by a 'ell of a sight." He seemed to regard stripes as a treachery to his ehums. "Stripes is low. Once you get promotion, you can't walk out no more with any on 'em, not even your squad ehum."

My friend had forgotten all about the killing part of the business. I have always been curious about this, and find it hard to believe that a man can get inured to horror. So I have asked for details, pressed for them even, making some sort of excuse to myself that as a writer I am entitled to be documented. I have particularly wanted to know about bayonet charges. There's something personal about them which there can't be about a shell.

"Horrid?" I asked.

"'Orrid? Naow!" Blundell replied. "You've no time to think about 'orrid. It's 'im or you. So you get 'im as quick as you can."

"Do they ever say anything?"

"Never 'eardened if they did. One chap did start to jabber. So I put my foot on his faee, and stuck 'im again. In the guts this time, to make sure. And of course 'e done jabbering then. Two bitters please, Miss."

Blundell isn't in the least like the soldiers in *A Shropshire Lad*. He's courting a servant-girl

in Buckingham Gate, who keeps him in beer-money.

Blundell went on: "Egspect I shall take on again. Should do for if I knew for a cert we was going to 'ave another war. It's this 'ere peace-time soldiering wot gits me. Treat yer like bloomin' cattle, they does. Yer cawnt even sit on the grass in the Park wiv a tart wivout bein' run. Too much bullyin' there is! Discipline they calls it; I call it bullyin'. Two of our orf'cers packed up through it."

It's not an earthly bit of use trying to judge the mentality of one class by the mentality of another. We talk glibly enough of the *nostalgie de la boue*, the old longing for the gutter. That's just decadent nonsense. Here we have actual longing for the mud of Flanders—a very different thing. And I quite understand that Blundell doesn't like the peace-time stuff. Most of the men *are* cattle, you see, and have to be treated as such.

I wonder when more or less intelligent people will get the virus of improving their fellow-creatures out of their systems? This mischievous poison teased me now. I found out that Blundell was fond of reading.

"What sort of books?"

"Orl sorts. Print's print. It's that dull in barracks you could read the blinkin' Bible."

This, of course, was a clear invitation to the early

Victorian in me to give him *Fors Clavigera*, *Self-Help* and *Log Cabin to White House*. I didn't fall into these particular traps. What I actually lent him was *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. This is the one work of genius which Socialism has produced, and about which our Tory press, well-bred and aloof when it suits them, has maintained a conspiracy of silence. It represents Capital as putting its foot on the face of Labour, and stabbing it in the guts to make sure. It is by a house-painter who made a first-hand indictment of the state of affairs on the lowest rung of the ladder, and died. It is quite unanswerable, and for that reason has never been answered.

This plasterer was no fool. He didn't make the mistake of painting workpeople as angels, and employers as devils. Nor did he retire into a warm, comfortable study, and wrap himself in Galsworthian impartiality. He simply drew what he saw, the intellectually dishonest capitalist, and the practically dishonest workman, ignorant, lazy, shiftless, dirty. Let me quote you a bit of dialogue which I think is truer than anything in Wells, and that's a pretty high standard. The socialist is expounding :

“ ‘Supposing, for example, that you and Harlow were shipwrecked on a desolate island, and you had saved nothing from the wreck but a bag containing a thousand sovereigns and he had a tin of biscuits and a bottle of water.’

‘ Make it beer ! ’ replied Harlow appealingly.

‘ Who would be the richer man, you or Harlow ? ’

‘ But then, you see, we ain’t shipwrecked on no dissolute island at all,’ sneered Cass. ‘ That’s the worst of your arguments. You can’t never get very far without supposing some ridic’lus thing or other. Never mind about supposing things wot ain’t true ; let’s ’ave facts and common sense.’ ”

Isn’t that perfection ? Don’t you know the man who couldn’t refrain from “ Make it beer ? ”

I find that Blundell is deaf to any considerations which do not touch him personally. Sometimes we get up little public-house debates on Socialism, and the bar gathers for a friendly wrangle. Like Hyde Park on Sunday night. You will understand that it is not so much a connected argument as a series of assertions.

“ Before I joined up,” somebody will begin, “ I was a railway-porter at a small station in Derbyshire. Fourteen bob a week wages, and wot tips I could make. The last strike made ’em give the bloke on my old job four quid a week ! So good luck to ’im ! say I. It’s their own blarsted fault.”

I point out that if all railway-servants are to be paid these sums we shan’t be able to carry on manufactures at a rate which will enable us to compete with Germany. Or that, alternatively, the railways will be ruined.

“Let ’em be ruined,” cries the ex-porter, “a lot they cared when we was ruined, the swine ! Fourteen bob a week !”

“Blessed are the poor,” said Blundell, spitting, “for they shall inherit b—— all !”

I flounder.

“If the railways, which means the shareholders, are ruined,” I begin, “it won’t be long before the State has to take the lines over again. The State is you and me. Now if you and me are going to take over all the industries of the country then we are all of us are going to be ruined together.”

“Who cares ? It’ll be a change from the working man being ruined all by ’isself !”

I point out that, according to my Tory newspaper, American coal can be landed at the English manufacturer’s door at seven shillings a ton less than the coal from the Welsh pits. (Privately, I do not believe this.) The paper goes on to argue that the collier’s wage must be reduced.

“It matters naowt how cheap American coal is,” says another. “When the miners have come to a proper understanding with them blokes”—pointing to the ex-porter—“there won’t be no American coal carried. See ?”

I point out that in such an event the mills will be unable to carry on, that we shall be prevented from selling our goods abroad, that the country will come to a full stop.

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"Let it," he answers. "There's an old woman who 'as the land near our pit as draws a shilling for every ton of coal as goes over it. And it's all got to go over it. There's no way round! Two 'undred tons of coal a day means ten quid into her pocket. Three thousand quid a year. If the country comes to a full stop then that old woman's income comes to a full stop too, and that's all there is to it!"

I point out that the Duchess of Glamorgan is entitled to her royalties. Was not the strip of land given to her great-great-great-grandmother by a King?

"Yer mean becos 'er ancestor was an 'ore we've got ter pay for it?"

"I do."

Blundell spits.

"Blarst 'er," he says, "*and* 'er grandmother!"

King Lear butts in here.

"That's 'istry," he says in a cracked sing-song. "Dead and gone 'istry. The new folk's diff'rent."

He turns to me.

"And you, sir, begging your pardon, you 'aven't the right to inflame these young gents against their lawful Sovereign. The present King and Queen earn their day's pay with any man and woman in these islands. Think of our great past. Think of Dryden and 'England's resplendent rose'."

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He stops, lifts up a trembling hand, and begins to quaver :

“O gracious God, how far have we
Profaned thy heavenly gift of Poetry!
Made prostitute and destitute . . .”

He breaks off. “Prostitute and destitute . . . destitute. . . . Made prostitute and profligate the age. . . .”

His eloquence is lost in incoherence.

Blundell looks at me and puts a significant, yet sympathetic, finger to his forehead.

“All the syme, there’s su’thing in wot ’e ses. Kings an such-like is good fer trade. Makes blokes posh theirselves up, so’ster get ’igher. Oo der yer fink’s goin’ ter present arms to a bleedin’ butcher? ’Taint ’uman, see?”

Last night we enrolled a new member—a pale youth with a pimply face and purple necktie, indifferent linen and long, dirty nails—the typical socialist. He had been leaning over the bar, flirting with the radiant goddess swabbing the zinc. After a bit he joined our group round the table.

“This is the way I look at it,” he said. “Us common chaps have lost faith in our betters, as we used to call ’em. The people with the money aren’t honest. Take the coal-strike. Lloyd George sent for both sides and told them to put their facts and figures on the table. The miners, who were ready, pulled theirs out of their pockets. The coal-owners

asked for a week in which to prepare theirs. Figures which were not good enough for investigation, were good enough to declare a lock-out."

Here he became rhetorical, with the air of one who knows his Hyde Park.

"Is this honest? Shouldn't an employer, before he takes a step which may mean, in fact which he intends to mean, the starvation of men, women and kids—for you can only force submission by starvation—shouldn't an employer first of all convince *himself* that his figures are correct beyond any shadow of possible doubt? Shouldn't the employer require more convincing than any Prime Minister? No, the coal-owners weren't ready, and never had been ready. Or else they hadn't agreed upon the same lies."

There is a hum of approval which spreads beyond our little table. The goddess who, open-mouthed, has momentarily remitted her swabbing, which she does with the vigour of an ostler strapping a horse, sets to work again. She continues in this for some time, and is then called off to answer the plaintive query of a lady who has known better days: "What'll I drink, dearie? Whisky I find spiritless, and gin is moody."

"There's only one way to avoid a smash-up same as in Russia," my orator went on, "and that is for Capital to take Labour into its confidence. Take the case of that coal which is seven shillings a ton too

dear. Let the coal-owners begin by knocking that old harpy off her perch. Let them get her tax down to a farthing or a penny a ton. Threepence, even, if you like. Anyhow, something. Let them do this to all the owners of royalties all over the country, and prove to the colliers that they *have* done it. Then let them talk about wages to the man who gets the coal. And if it's proved necessary, he'll meet them half-way. Only it must be proved. Let's have another round of drinks."

After this formality had been observed: "There's one principle which is absolutely vital and that Labour can't give way on, and that's this. If you've got places for twenty clerks, and only nineteen chaps to fill 'em, then those nineteen can force wages up to any price they like. But if there are twenty-one blokes to fill the twenty places then the bosses can get wages down as low as they like. Because *not* getting one of the places means starvation. In other words, what I call the practicability of wages, or their comparative cheapness, depends upon there always being a twenty-first man. The fact that we can compete abroad is owing to the existence all over the country of hundreds and thousands of twenty-first men. The commercial stability of a country depends upon there being large numbers of unemployed. And for this the country must pay. If a man wants to work he has a right to work, and if the prosperity of his country depends upon his being out of work he

must receive a minimum living wage for it. He mustn't starve."

"But how about the unemployable?"

"That's the old parrot-cry. How about the unemployable in the upper ten? Ninety per cent. of society women couldn't so much as scrub a floor."

"Masters and men. Masters and men," broke in King Lear. "Both exist by Omnipotent Concession."

The Socialist went on:

"Now, is that principle about paying the unemployed for being unemployed going to be recognised, or isn't it? If it is, then the people will back up the State."

He seemed to regard the State and the people as separate entities.

"If it isn't, then Peace Conferences don't matter, and bloody war doesn't matter. I read to-day about a Russian Countess kicking up a fuss because she has to live on black bread and soup. She don't seem to realise that the peasants in her country, and the working-man in ours, lived for hundreds of years on black bread without soup, and glad to get it. Had to look mighty pleased, and lick the hand that fed 'em. Did you see that letter from an Army toff in to-day's paper? No? A General he was."

He pulled a newspaper cutting out of his pocket.

"This is what he writes, 'I wish the public would refuse to give money to those men who play bands in the streets, and shake money-boxes in people's

faces. It is doing an infinity of harm. Boys give up permanent jobs to go round with a band. They get £8 or £9 a week. What the country wants is work and not music. Only by honest work can the trade of this country be restored.' ”

“ General or no general, 'e's a fool ! ” cried Blundell, who had pricked his ears at the words “ Army toff.” “ A bloody fool, that's wot 'e is ! Is 'e prepared to find jobs for all these 'ere blokes wot's playing in street-bands ? If not, I suppose 'e'd 'ave 'em sent to gaol ? 'Ow does 'e know that they can get work ? 'Ow does 'e think their wives and kids lives ? Wot the country wants is work and not music, is it ? Wot these band-chaps want is food and not music, you can bet yer life on that. Blokes wot write blarsted rot want shooting.”

I deprecate heat. I explain the bow-window's outlook upon life. I point out that only by the honest work of the common herd can the dividends of the General be restored.

“ One thing I know for certain,” my Socialist went on, “ and that is the nobs have got no tact. One night during the strike I was passing down Park Lane, and what should I see at one of the houses, but a big ball going on ? Some of the blinds weren't down, and there were a lot of people dancing and drinking champagne, and a band playing. There was an awning, and about a hundred motor-cars waiting outside, and thirty or forty policemen taking care of

'em. Now who pays for all that? You and me. What right have those blokes to flaunt their wealth in our faces?"

"We was confined to barracks ready to fire on the mob," said Blundell.

And so on, and so forth.

I often wonder how much our bow-window Colonels know of that dull treadmill of the mind hidden beneath the bear-skin of the Marlborough House sentry, of the passions obscured by the spit and polish of the cavalry-man's cuirass. Often, too, I wonder whether a body without a mind is a feasible conception.

I remember Blundell telling me how, during an advance, when they were told to get down to it and dig, he found a hefty nigger in his part of the shallow trench. The chap was dead and he wanted his room. As Blundell couldn't shift him single-handed, he shouted to the next man to give him a hand.

"Blimey," said the fellow, "if it ain't old Snowball! Useter go on fer six rahnds at the Ring, 'e did. Useter get isself knocked aht fer five bob. Reckon e's got knocked aht fer less, this time."

And calm, in the middle of a murderous lot of heavy stuff, with his chums rolling over like potted rabbits, and Blundell ducking and digging for life, the fellow undid the flap of the dead man's left-hand top-

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pocket, took out his pay-book and extracted a five-franc note.

"Strewf!" he cried, "the quarter-bloke might 'ave 'ad this. *If my luck ain't dead in!*"

And I myself once saw with my own eyes a letter couched as follows :

"58692 Pte. J. Higgins,
10 Platoon, C. Company,
5-Battalion,
Loamshire Regt., B.E.F.

"DEAR MUM,—Thanks for parcel and Woodbines. Don't worry about me I am in the pink. Don't worry about Brother Bill hes dead. Love to our Lil and give my love to Nell if she still calls round. Roll on Blighty.

"Your loving son,

"JACK."

"xxxx for Mum.
xxxx for Lil.
xxxx for Nell.
xxxx "

Our critics are never tired of assuring the novelist that he has only to reproduce textually the waking thoughts of any man to produce a masterpiece. I wonder how much of a truthful book about the lower classes would be printable? The Socialist flings out his banner, showing aspiration trodden under foot. Will he admit that the "victims of the Capitalist system" don't aspire? That they are clods and brutes? What the Socialist should be after is the

equalisation, not of wealth, but of opportunities for happiness. And I do not see how we can weigh out those opportunities until we know in what that happiness consists. To what exactly does the Life-Guard aspire as he sits on his horse in "the box"? Of what, exactly, is that six feet of "blood and bone and beef and beer" thinking as he surveys across the road Spencer Compton, eighth Duke of Devonshire? What cons he as he throttles the oaths in his "charred gorge," and runs his eye over the Duke of Cambridge's sorry gelding? I'll tell you. He is thinking that an hour is sixty blooming minutes. He is thinking that a pint would go down all right. He is wondering how that two bob on the two-thirty has gone on, and whether Number Seven's pretty house maid is the "doings."

I wonder when novelists will realise how many readers there are who are sick to death of the amatory permutations and combinations of the Browns, Smiths and Robinsons. Personally, I would rather a book argued with me than told me a story. The plain man is not musical, but he listens to Sir Henry Wood. There are Promenade Concerts; why not Promenade Economics?

I have written of the soldier as of the class which makes up the bulk of the world. What do we know of ninety-nine hundredths of humanity? The average novelist is solely preoccupied with wastrels, the dependent people with what they are pleased to call, God

save them, independent incomes. The man who consumes without producing is literally a waster, a squanderer of the world's wealth. Morally, he is the only pauper. The world clothes, feeds and entertains him, and all he gives in return is his money. Sir Arthur Pinero once confessed that he had no interest in the conflict of characters endowed with less than two thousand a year. His drama, though he doesn't know it, is the drama of the almshouse.

What do we know of the sailor, pent up in his floating prison, the 'bus conductor, barman, warehouse-clerk, match-seller, cinema attendant? What is the private tap of the worker in the slaughter-house? We write about him as though he were a joke, whereas he's real! Has the fellow a mistress? Monstrous fancy! He is probably a decent fellow, has a wife like some overblown peony, dandles his babe upon his knee and likes his beer. Are we to pretend that the seamstress, the lodging-house drudge, the drab of the streets are of less interest than Mr. Compton Mackenzie's showy harlots, or Miss Dell's flashing males?

To your personal address, Jerry.

I'm not broke, but I'm going to be, unless I "look slippy." I've got a little money left, but not much. What shall I turn—tinker, tailor, beggarman, thief? There are only three ways of making money—working with your hands, letting out your brain, and selling

cheese. I've never "followed a trade," and there are no hirers for my particular brains. Help me to choose the brand of cheese. Bye-bye.

NOLL.

.

Jerry's answer was contained on a post-card.

"Try groceries. Public doesn't want books, but they must eat. Socialism's all right. It's the Socialists who are all wrong."

CHAPTER VIII

LOOKING ROUND

ELEVEN hundred pounds, at five per cent. per annum, is precisely one pound one shilling and twopence a week. That is not destitution, if you like, but uncommonly near it. There is nothing that can be done with such an amount, beyond, of course, spending it. Eleven hundred pounds did not come within the scope of that column headed "Business Opportunities" which Oliver scanned so assiduously every morning. His bank-balance stood some thirty or forty pounds higher, but the round figure was the safer from the point of view of business investment.

Oliver was becoming nervous, and as often as twice a week would fall to making calculations as to how long his eleven hundred pounds would last. In two months he had spent fifty-eight pounds, say, three hundred and fifty a year. Say that, with diminishing interest, he could contrive to hold out for three years. And after that what? There are people who, for a thousand pounds in hand, will

face an eternity of exile in the Australian bush, but our hero was not of that sort. The Sheldons were not a family that had ever consorted with wolves, either at the door or in any neighbouring forest—the prospect of destitution even in three years' time was scaring. Often and often Oliver repeated to himself: “*Quand la caissière lui eut rendu la monnaie de sa pièce de cent sous, Georges Duroy sortit du restaurant. Comme il portait beau. . . .*” But suppose the weather had not been fine, suppose Duroy had not been able to take the pavement with a swagger, and had been forced to dodge from dripping awning to dripping blind, to slink along the deserted streets to his miserable garret? Suppose that he had not met Forestier? Shiveringly, shudderingly, Oliver would fall to wondering what, say in two years' time, he should do when the girl at the cash desk handed him the change out of his last half-sovereign. He might not, like Duroy, have even a railway clerkship to fall back upon.

The unsuccessful writer is, surely, the last of God's creatures. Providence, having ultimate confidence in George Meredith, provided a deaf old woman who desired to be read to. Having obviously no confidence in Oliver Sheldon would it, he wondered, trot forth so much as an octogenarian in need of a companion-secretary? Oliver ran over his qualifications. Fluent French, a knowledge of English

literature from Pope to Bradley, something of a taste in claret.

His pen ?

But even if that had been the authentic Garvicious fountain, the eternal spring of purest bosh, there was not any possibility of its affording him a livelihood. This for the simple reason that his publisher was that well-known booby-trap, Spider Smith. Smith's manner suggests that he has been brought up at Oxford, his commercial morality that he was born in Houndsditch. It is popularly supposed that he is in daily if not hourly communication with all the chancellors, vice-chancellors, wardens, dons and tutors of the kingdom, so that he may be the first to hear of budding literary talent. When the moment arrives for young Scribbler to leave his University, Smith pounces and invites him to partridges and Burgundy or oysters and Chablis, with additional libations of immense floods of flattery. And Scribbler leaves Smith's bijou band-box on Putney Heath—"The Web" his victims call it—the poorer by an engagement binding him to deliver his literary soul into Smith's hands for its next six outpourings, together with their value as film and theatre fodder. On paper Scribbler is to get half profits after expenses of publishing *and advertising* have been deducted. Sometimes, in extra-generous mood, and over a particularly good cigar, Spider will wave him an additional eighth of the profits—on paper. But as

there never are any profits this largesse costs him nothing. Is Smith dishonest? None has been found to go into court and say so. The facetious have suggested that the ability to unravel Smith's books should be made the honours test in chartered accountancy—but the jest is bitter in the mouth. Has ever writer been found to publish again with Smith when, at long last, the days of bondage are over? Don't be silly!

The reader may pertinently ask why Oliver did not seek employment in the more obvious field of journalism. Rightly or wrongly, he had decided that in the daily papers letters finds only a grave. He would not submit to that remunerative oblivion until all other fields had proved utterly barren. It was not that he held the public in contempt, nor that he believed it necessary to write down to them. It was the editors who were the fools, the editors who wanted him to write down because of their own vast illiterary and preconceived notions of "what the public wants." For them, he believed, Dante, living to-day, would have imagined a more fearful circle.

The devil driving, Oliver was prepared to lower his art so far as to write "middles" and reviews for the better-class weeklies. Although he was moderately successful in finding such employment, it did not, as any unhappy "literary" journalist will realise, noticeably increase his income.

Therefore Oliver had come to regard his eleven

hundred pounds as a last spar in the sea of destitution. In the meantime, he pursued that most wretched of existences—the life of sordid and petty economy. On the well-known principle of the futility of being poor and seeming poor he had taken a small flat at Earl's Court at two and a half guineas a week, plus ten shillings for the caretaker. The address was a reasonable one from which to answer advertisements in the *Feudal Times*.

At once he fell to combating that sense of degradation which the conviction of uselessness brings. Could it be that he would fail to get employment for the simple reason that he was not employable? Daily he scanned the papers for some purpose to which eleven hundred pounds could be turned, and gradually he confined his area of search to the "Businesses for Sale" column of the *Daily Sludge*. Constant perusal of these fascinating little paragraphs thrust out in him all the small shopkeeper's tentacles towards acquisition. His fingers, or so he pretended, cramped themselves in till-ward gesture as he read :

VILLAGE GENERAL AND BAKING, lovely dist., nr. Windsor; rent, £65; lease, 21 yrs., or Freehold, £950 extra; smart d.-f. shop; splendid home of 9 rms.; 1 acre garden, etc.; trade, £85 incl. 9 sacks and £10 smalls; baker empl.; one change 50 yrs.; £850 incl. Ford van, etc.; s.a.v., £350. Briggs, 27 Castle Street, Slough.

But that meant leaving London, and his knowledge of baking was, at best, rudimentary.

How would greengrocery go ? He liked the look of :

GREENGROCER'S AND FRUITERER'S,
Hampstead ; live business ; high-class connection ;
takings average £80 weekly ; fine lock-up premises at
nominal rent of £50, p.a. ; long lease, goodwill and
trade fixtures, £550 only ; lease worth money ; Sale
imperative owing to illness. Sole Agents, William
Small, Ltd., 47A Finchley Road, N.W. 3.

Then he reflected that greengrocers always have filthy hands, and that cabbage-stalks notoriously mean broken legs. One day he paused, and held his breath, at the attractive legend :

TOBACCO, CONFECTIONERY, STATIONERY
AND NEWSPAPERS with Groceries ; N.W. suburb ;
returns, £80 to 90 p.w. ; present hands, 26½ years ;
established 40 years ; double-fronted shop, parlour,
5 rooms, kitchen, scullery, bathroom ; lease about 19
years ; rent, £70, let off flat, £26 ; price for valuable
lease, fixtures, utensils, £800 ; stock at valuation
about £350. Apply Edward Oddle & Co., 200
Westbourne Grove.

This seemed respectable, smacked, so to speak, of the old Manchester days, of his mother's shop. . . . Once more Oliver set out on that visit of inspection which had proved a disillusion on a dozen previous occasions.

First he sought out Messrs. Oddle & Co., and was at once ushered into the presence of Oddle himself, a gross man of many chins and overlapping stomachs.

"Are you, sir," asked Thaddeus Vercingetorex Oddle, impressively, "on the look-out for something GENUINE?"

Oliver was.

"Because, if you are not, it's no use wasting my time. Please deprecate that fact."

Oliver "deprecated."

"I have here," the fat man went on, "a list of businesses which I would offer to nobody. Flat-catching affairs, if you take my meaning."

Oliver nodded.

"It would surprise you if I told you that of the 'undreds of businesses now in my 'ands, I regard only three as what you might call GENUINE?"

"It would indeed."

"'Uman nature, young man, 'uman nature! You 'ave to be in my line o' trade, before you realise 'ow low Adam fell!"

"As low as Lucifer?"

"'E was a gentleman, in comparison," said Oddle, his brow darkening.

Oliver felt that he was in the presence of the Blake of the small business world.

"Now, which of my adverts was you a-thinkin' of considerin', sir?"

Oliver laid the *Daily Sludge* cutting upon the fat man's desk.

"Wot a most peculiar thing!" said Oddle. "Bless my soul, if that ain't a most extrordinary thing! Didn't I tell you as I 'ad only three concerns as could really be described as GENUINE? Blow me, if this ain't one of 'em!"

And he fell to expatiating upon Oliver's extraordinary luck in being first in the field.

"It's all along o' 'Erne Bay."

Oliver looked his question. I shall cut short the Oddlean floridities. What they amounted to was that the Tobacco, Confectionery, Stationery and Newspaper with Groceries Business, now offered by John and Henry Dobb at the altogether ridiculous price of £800 with stock at valuation, would never have come into the market if William Dobb, their uncle, had not died and left his nephews an Ironmongery stores at salubrious Herne Bay. The fat man urged upon Oliver the advisability of immediate action. He suggested that his "young friend" should frequent the neighbourhood for a while, and make small purchases of tobacco, confectionery, stationery, newspapers and even occasional groceries, and so ascertain for himself the genuineness of the business.

"Only," said Oddle, "there's a danger."

"Of what?"

"Of the business being snapped up. Like a

salmon," he added vaguely. "Let me recuperate that the proposition is ABSOLOOTLY GENUINE."

Oliver nodded.

"You're the first," concluded Oddle. "Don't be the last. Dobbs' Stores only came into my 'ands yesterday. The advert in the *Sludge* only come out this morning."

Oliver knew this to be true. He had sufficient familiarity with the "Tob-conf-stat" column to be able to recognise a new face at a glance. The telephone rang. Oddle listened and then :

"No, sir! Not yet, but we're in treaty . . . At four o'clock? Certainly. . . . Good morning to *you*, sir."

He turned to Oliver.

"What did I tell you? Like a salmon!"

The reader who has ever bought a horse from a low-class dealer knows that a second customer is always, providentially, on hand, either hanging round the corner of the street, or with his nose against the tap-room window. Therefore he may hold that Oddle's conversation did not go beyond the outer office, and that the second seeker after the business of Messrs. Dobb was Oddle's own clerk. But the reader would be wrong. The telephone did genuinely ring, and the speaker at the other end was a small tobacconist in Hammersmith, dissatisfied with the turnover of £60-£70 to which, presumably, it had pleased Providence to call him. Also Oddle had spoken the whole

truth, nothing extenuating. Dobbs' stores was a perfectly genuine proposition. What Oliver did not know was that businesses are like horses in another sense, and that a concern which may be docility itself when the reins are held by one man may kick over the traces in other control. It is all a matter of "hands."

He left Oddle—who, I regret to state, now vanishes from my story into the limbo of unfulfilled characters, to be glimpsed again for a moment only—the proud possessor of an order to view Dobbs' Stores, No. 319, Belladonna Road.

Belladonna Road is the big thoroughfare which runs from Paddington Station west with a touch of south, parallel with and to the north of the Bayswater Road. It emerges meanly into Toxopholite Street, thence takes renewal of dignity at the corner of Portmadoc Gardens. Dobbs' Stores was, and still is, at and round the corner of Belladonna Road and that street called Phillimore, which bisects the Road where the Toxopholites begin. It boasts an entrance in both thoroughfares. To tell the truth the business has always been a little shy of the less dignified entrance, and Belladonna Road alone figures on its bill-heads.

It now becomes important for me to state that Oliver's visit to the optimistic Oddle took place on a singularly blithe morning in late August. It was half this accident of the weather, and half the fact that our friend made the approach from Padding-

ton rather than from Notting Hill, which determined the total loss of his fortune of eleven hundred pounds. But for the sunshine Oliver might not have been so "taken with" that gleaming window,—the fascinating rivalries of Cadbury, Rowntree and Fry, the criss-cross ecstasies, nut, milk and plain, of Cailler and Peters, the gums and pastilles, the almond *dragées*, the nougat and the marzipan of Pascall.

The magnificence was continued round the corner. There the double-window had been divided in twain—the first half cheerful with the masterpieces of Messrs. Wills, Players, and other of the smoker's household names, the second a snare to entrap the scribbler, eloquent of snowy writing-pads and immaculate envelopes, pink fields of blotting-paper across which deployed armies of blue and violet inks. Sticks of red and green sealing-wax, neat bundles of blue and yellow pencils, fantastic penholders, all vied with one another to add enchantment to the landscape. Reprints of Guy Boothby and E. Phillips Oppenheim suggested a neighbourhood a-thirst for literature. Through the open door, behind the counter, could be seen the shelves of a lending library. Beyond this double window, and now definitely in Phillimore Street, was the Grocery Department. The advertisement had simply said "With Groceries," but already Oliver had decided upon the more swelling name. I shall not describe this section. A grocer's shop is a grocer's shop, and there is no more to be said.

What I may, perhaps, indicate here is that the Messrs. Dobb, though honest, were not altogether fools, and that they had arranged that their appearance in Oddle's list should synchronize with window-dressing operations of a magnificence altogether unusual. This, again, was perfectly fair. I make no suggestion here against Oddle or Dobb. They and the Stores were GENUINE. The £80-£90 p.w. was GENUINE. The profit of £8 p.w. was GENUINE. But then John and Henry Dobb were genuine grocers.

Oliver stood for some little time on the opposite side of the road gazing at that important property which he felt in his bones was soon deliciously to be his. Already he conceived it, not as a means of livelihood, but as a toy, a thing to be played with, almost an art. He was bitten, you see, by the habit and passion of phrase making. Kegs of butter, in his mind, took on a romantic, golden gleam, and he found himself debating whether paunch or belly were the better word for the containing barrel. It did not occur to him that if you buy butter at one-and-seven a pound and sell it at one-and-eight, you are going, at least in the hot weather, to lose money. Dates flashed some such splendid jingle as :

“Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir
 Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
 With a cargo of ivory,
 And apes and peacocks,
 Sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white wine.”

He did not realise that it is no good making a ten per cent. profit on a four pound box of dates, since three and a half pounds is your district's total demand for that commodity over a period of three months, and what is left becomes unsaleable. Bacon . . . well, it is not easy to poetize over a side of even the best Wiltshire, though your modern æsthete can find sonnets in hams and odes in fore-quarters. Oliver would have been much better employed taking a lesson in porcine anatomy. He would then have learnt that to each half of the pig there goes one shoulder and one hock. But perhaps nothing short of divination would have taught him that there are few customers for hocks, that the accumulation of these from June to September is noisome, whilst even in the cooler months of the year they remain unprofitable.

As Oliver stands surveying Dobbs' Store, these things are unmercifully hidden from him.

The welcome of the brothers was all that it could have been. John Dobb was the master-mind of the concern, and, as such, sate in the little parlour which divided the Confectionery, Tobacco and Stationery departments from that of the Groceries. In appearance John was spare, austere, and possessed of Matthew Arnold's side-whiskers. The line of his nose and forehead would have entitled him to play a leading part in the dramas of Mr. John Drinkwater. His books were admirable examples of the particularities

of unimportance. He would write "Peak Frean 2 tins Best Mixed" in a hand fairer than Shelley's. His ledger pages were more explicit than a proposition in Euclid. About Henry Dobb there is nothing to record, except that he suffered from eczema.

The brothers made frank display of their books. John produced a banking account, and demonstrated that over a period of years he and his brother had, between them, drawn eight pounds a week out of the business. There was nothing sinister about the lease, which had yet another seventeen years to run; the property demanded no imminent repairs; neither had there been any bothersome interpellation by the Paddington Borough Council, Medical Officer of Health, or any other busybody. Whilst Oliver was making his careful scrutiny he noted that what he now began to call his front shop was constantly and even incommodiously packed. All the world that morning seemed to be wanting small Gold Flakes or large Players or—in order not to offend the susceptibilities of our tobacco-magnates, large Gold Flakes and small Players. The profits on these transactions, it was pointed out to him, was no less than eighteen per cent. A woman, under-dressed and over-scented, carried off a five shilling box of note-paper on which the profit, he learnt agreeably, was thirty-three and a third per cent. There was a constant sale of matches, newspapers, packets of chocolate; and when, in the middle of the day, the children

came home from school, the trade in sweetmeats was phenomenal. At one o'clock it was announced that the morning's takings amounted to four pounds.

From the beginning Oliver had doubts as to whether he could manage the glib and oily address which the successful handling of Groceries, and also of Tobacco, Confectionery, and Stationery demands. It was pointed out to him that all he had to do was to engage a junior assistant to fulfil the functions of Henry. He was assured that junior assistants at two pounds a week patrolled Belladonna Road by day and by night, and clustered about street corners thicker than blackberries in October. Two from eight leave six. Six pounds a week is three hundred pounds a year—a handsome return upon a capital of eleven hundred pounds.

“Of course,” said John, “you would have to keep the books, which should present no difficulty as you are a literary man.”

And Oliver bethought him of Richardson keeping his accounts and writing his imperishable masterpieces in the back room of his printer's shop. This was a fatal parallel, and from that moment his inquisition into the affairs of Dobbs' Stores was purely perfunctory. Grandiosities crowded thick upon him. He saw himself, by strict attention to business and the prosecution of small sales, the owner of a line of Dobbs' Stores extending from Edmonton in the north to Camberwell in the south, trailing a cometary

glory which would find its rise in the Old Deer Park at Richmond and lose itself magnificently in the Black-wall Tunnel. What Lyons, Sainsbury and the Home and Colonial had done, Oliver Sheldon could do.

“And the Groceries,” he said, “who sees to them?”

He was informed that these were in the sole charge of a Miss Stebbing who, it was suggested, might now fittingly be presented to him.

And here, at last, I come to my heroine.

And here, too, I am once more up against the immemorial bugbear of the novelist—the necessity of describing that young woman’s appearance. As if that mattered!

As a young man I was in love with four heroines—Lorna Doone, she of *The Lilac Sunbonnet*, Tess of the d’Urbervilles, and Ann Pornick—and I do not know that I ever made any definite mental picture of them. If I rack my conscience I think perhaps I must admit to having conceived Lorna as darkish, Tess with a velvet brow and two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes, Crockett’s young woman as fair, and Ann a “mousey-pousey.” For the rest they might have been tall or short, shapely or squat—it was all one to me.

Perhaps I cannot do better than give the reader his or her choice. Miss Stebbing is, if you like, not too tall for her years and of a graceful carriage. Her features are classically regular; she has dark blue eyes, lustrous chestnut hair, and a form “beauti-

fully defined and lacking only the development of mature growth, but suggesting perfection of mould."

On the other hand, she shall, if the reader prefer it, exceed the medium height of women. You may have her slightly though elegantly made, with large and lustrous hazel eyes, fringed with long lashes sweeping the cheeks. The features shall not be too classically formed, but they shall "possess even greater attraction from being illumined by the most winning, bewitching smiles which increase the fascination of the beholder the longer he dwells upon them."

Let it be supposed that my heroine possesses neither the fascinating plainness of Lilian Gish, nor the luxuriant insipidity of the Talmadge Sisters. Her beauty shall be Pickfordian, though not so dwarfish. Beneath the air of the inconscient feather-brain she conceals the machinery, perfectly oiled and smooth-running, for the furtherance of her own interests. Some three months before her introduction to Oliver Miss Stebbing had carried off first prize in a competition devised by the *Daily Sludge* to determine the important question as to which of England's grocery-assistants was the comeliest. She received, to her disappointment, no more than 17,457 votes.

But if it is difficult to paint features which, after all, exist, how nearly impossible to present a portrait of the mind, to say nothing of the soul. Miss Steb-

bing's mind reacted to two mediums, and two only—*The Daily Sludge* and the cinema. Such of her waking hours as were not devoted to butter-slapping and cheese-wiring were devoted to open-mouthed admiration of screen-heroines about whose very maidenliness there is, to a decent observer, something almost obscene.

Before judging Miss Stebbing and her class too harshly, let us consider for a moment the kind of mental pabulum upon which she must feed. For although there are some hundreds of thousands of pictures, there is only apparently one theme. And that theme, interpreted briefly, spells Idiocy.

Miss Stebbing's morning preoccupation is the illustrated paper; that of the evening the picture palace. What of the dinner hour? Daily from twelve till one she will wallow in the private lives of screen heroes and heroines. She will be invited to contemplate every aspect between man and woman except the decent one of marriage. Her mind jumps directly from free-love to separation. On Monday night a new film entitled "Divorce" is to be released at the Edgware Road Oleodrome. Preliminary literature suggests that the questions raised by this film for Miss Stebbing's consideration are:

Is divorce a cure or a curse?

Is divorce worth the notoriety?

Does divorce right a wrong? Or does it make two wrongs?

Is divorce a way out of marriage, or the way to another marriage?

Is divorce constructive or destructive?

When in danger, who has the right to protect a woman—her divorced husband or her promised husband?

Has the future a better claim on a woman than the past?

Can a man who does not understand women make a success of marriage?

Hardly can Miss Stebbing bridge the intervening days. Sunday, despite the attentions of her "boy," palls. Monday's work is a torture. Hardly can Miss Stebbing breathe till she is assured by ocular demonstration that this great film, to which the whole of her creation has moved since it was heralded in *Cinema Bits*, has indeed passed the British Board of Film Censors.

On Tuesday *Cinema Bits* comes out again, and the film for next week's release is entitled "Illegitimacy." She is invited to consider whether illegitimacy is a boon or a blessing, etc., etc.

No wonder that Miss Stebbing's mind is a blank. Her vocabulary and her ways of thought become stereotyped. If she has a headache she will say that she is "bad in bed, but worse up." At the least reproach she will reply tartly "well, don't sing a hymn about it!" If it rains she will look up at the Heavens with a pious "send it down, David!" Does

the errand-boy scratch his head and she will rap out a pert "got a visitor?" "Thank your Mother for the rabbit," and "the bottom stair's the lowest," are for ever in her mouth. Her circumlocutions have become second nature. Does she desire to indicate that the boy who delivers the newspapers lacks go, she will aver that he "couldn't knock the skin off a milk pudding." She will deliver herself of this remark twenty times in the week. A little black music case which she carries is as full of cheap sentimentality as her mouth is full of cheap nonsense. Opened, it will reveal puling ditties concerning Persian water-brooks and pale hands pink-tipped, and two-paged melodies half plaint and half conjecture.

"Didst thou but Love." "Wert thou Unborn." "If the Stars were Flowers"—sickly variations upon the age-long theme of "Roses and You." With all her faults be it said that Miss Stebbing is a good-hearted girl.

The elder Dobb put his crane-like neck round the door of the Grocery Department.

"Miss Stebbing," he said, "may I trouble you for a moment?"

Miss Stebbing consented to be troubled.

"This young lady looks after the Groceries," said John. "She is, as it were, our manageress."

Oliver expressed himself pleased to meet Miss Stebbing.

“This gentleman is thinking of taking over the business,” Dobb went on, “and I am recommending you to him as our most valued assistant.”

“I hope it keeps fine for him,” said Miss Stebbing.

After some further courtesies, Oliver took his leave, promising to look in again on the following day.

In the ordinary way Jerry would have been summoned to immediate council. But even private secretaries must have holidays, and that engaging young man had taken one volume of Kant and half-a-dozen Nat Goulds to North Wales. For once in a way it seemed to Oliver that it would be jolly to take independent action, to meet Jerry on his return with a *fait accompli*, and the news that he had not only commenced, but was a fully-fledged, grocer. He had at this time a quite extraordinary hankering after petty tradesmanship—a hankering which, twenty years earlier, would have been unthinkable to a man of decent education. But Messrs. Wells, Bennett and the minor poets have changed all that, and possibly the loss of Oliver’s remaining fortune is to be laid at the door of those who drivel about the dignity of small shopkeeping.

“Heaven bless grocers’ shops wherein
Raisins are with tawny skin,
Murrey wine, and green liqueurs,
Curious spice in canisters,

Honest ham and mother tea
Isinglass and carroway . . .
Eggs fresh within and white without,
Cocoa of origin devout,
Nuts and string and brooms and mops,
Saveloys and lollipops—
God, be good to grocers' shops ! ”

God is good—to the multiple owner, or to the small owner who never lets his counter out of sight.

On the following morning Oliver went down to Belladonna Road, armed with an air which he believed to be business-like, and an offer which had the merit of being definite. He would give £600 for the business, and agree to take the stock at valuation provided that the total purchase money should not amount to more than eight hundred pounds, and provided also that Miss Stebbing would continue to direct the fortunes of the Grocery Department.

John Dobb listened to the proposal with an air of grocerly condescension. It was not, he gathered, the kind of thing which Oliver's standing as a gentleman, man of the world, and a commencing tradesman had led him to expect. With the utmost civility he begged to decline the offer.

Oliver hinted that he was a man of few words, and that his proposal must be taken in the light of an ultimatum.

Mr. Dobb renewed his civilities, and for a moment there was silence. The situation was critical. Oliver

felt that if he were to ask Dobb to inquire definitely as to Miss Stebbing's views concerning her continuance in office, that step would commit him to another one hundred pounds. Dobb on the other hand had not the slightest intention of letting Oliver go. He was as they say "asking eight hundred pounds," but was in reality willing to dispose of the business to anybody who should offer him five hundred or even four-fifty. The stock was just about three hundred. At seven hundred and fifty Dobb was more than a willing seller, and here Oliver had virtually offered him a higher figure.

Now it is supposed that if these sums were in hundreds of thousands the reader would be inclined to view them romantically. But who to me says ten thousand says a million—I can make no distinctions in the inconceivable. I have, however, some notion of what such a sum as eight hundred pounds really means. It is one-fourth of the sum which the *Daily Sludge* will pay for the memoirs of a harlot acquitted of the murder of her paramour, and forty times the reward of the hack who writes them.

"If you will excuse me," said Dobb, who was a man of resource, "I will leave you for a few moments, as I have to step over to the bank. Perhaps you might like to have a few words with Miss Stebbing."

John was a good judge of character, and knew perfectly well that Oliver would confine his con-

versation with that young lady to the future prospects, and not to the past record of the business. Not that he had anything to fear. That eight pounds a week was a genuine profit, arrived at by an intensity of vigilance such as would stagger the keenest watcher of the skies on the eve of his greatest discovery. John knew, of course, that the difference between his aptitude for the business and Oliver's amateurishness was a good deal more than eight pounds a week, and he gave our young friend twelve months at the most, and probably not more than six. Meanwhile he and Henry would "take an easy" at Herne Bay. In six or nine months' time he would repurchase the business for little more than the value of such stock as should be left, and re-install Henry. The business, in fact, had to be sold to Oliver at Oliver's price, if more could not be got. John Dobb kept his imaginary bank-manager in conversation for three-quarters of an hour, and on his return found that young man in eager discussion with Miss Stebbing as to a more attractive setting out of her counters.

Miss Stebbing had expressed her entire willingness to accept a new employer. Three times in three-quarters of an hour she had hoped that it would "keep fine for him." When Oliver asked her whether she saw possibilities of extension in the business, she replied that it was "a mute point"; and when he suggested that it would be rather jolly for them both to put a shoulder to the wheel she answered, "Most

one-sidedly ! ” The two got on together, as the phrase goes, like a house on fire. Oliver was taken with the girl’s undoubted charm. What Miss Stebbing thought was that if Miss Stebbing could not turn a simple gentleman to advantage, her name was not what it was.

The negotiations were not long drawn out, Oliver stuck to his offer, and by mid-day he had agreed to purchase the business—lock, stock and barrel—for the round sum of eight hundred pounds. He pulled out his cheque-book, and there and then wrote out a cheque for one hundred pounds to fasten the bargain.

“ If I’d known he was so keen,” John Dobb said afterwards, “ I would have stuck him for a thousand quid.”

It was an exquisite morning in early September when Oliver walked down the Belladonna Road to take possession. The gilt letters on the sign, which Dobb had not failed to point out had been newly gilded, leaped out to meet the sun and him. An old man on the kerb was playing the fiddle, and as Oliver drew near he recognised the tune. It was Raff’s *Cavatina*.

His mind leaped to the past—his father, his mother, his old nurse. Was shopkeeping the end of their brave desires on his behalf ? He thought of the little patch of back-garden, the cricket-pitch, his father’s “ Play forward, Noll. Remember this, Nolly, throughout life, that no man need be ashamed of getting out who plays forward.” Was shopkeeping playing forward ? He thought of the day when he

threw the ball at Jerry, and his chum "fell against de wall."

It was in a mood uncommon to grocers that Oliver assumed the proprietorship of Dobbs' Stores.

At the beginning the shop did very well.

The place was like a new diocese to a translated bishop, a programme to a candidate first standing for parliamentary election, a new scheme for the curtailment of liberty to a Puritan.

In plain English, the shop was a new toy and a mechanical toy too. It seemed to go without supervision and almost without winding up. A boy was easily found for the Tobacco, Stationery and Confectionery Department. His name was Arthur, and although his insurance card probably gave another appellation, what that was remained unknown. Arthur was untidy and unkempt, tremendously willing and an enthusiastic, inefficient worker. He had what the politician would call a following; that is to say, a number of louts, his mates, would encumber the shop every evening from six o'clock to eight, and more or less throughout the whole of Sunday. They contributed little to the day's takings, and scared away old ladies timorous of so much masculinity.

Each of us is probably born to a trade as resistlessly as the poet is born to his. Arthur was a born mechanic, happy only when he was surrounded by mess, muddle and the insides of things. That which I suppose I must call his mind was definitely

set, not on Oliver's shop, but on that situation of job-hand at a garage which he had not been competent to keep. He was as honest as any other unwatched grocery assistant. That is to say, his pilferings in cash and in kind, from the till and from the shelves, probably did not amount to more than thirty shillings a week, and say two pounds at Christmas. Arthur's method of "digging out" the shop was to clean and tidy one part at the expense of another. You can always tell the amateur shopkeeper in that his untidiness is patent to the eye. Probably the profit in retail shopkeeping is not sufficiently large to run to the labour which ensures cleanliness. But the professional shopkeeper is known by this that he keeps his dirt out of sight, beneath the counter.

In the back shop Miss Stebbing queened it entirely to Oliver's satisfaction. That astute young lady had quickly given her employer to understand that she was to be left in undisputed governance of the Groceries. That Oliver might not be hampered by too close attention to the minor details of this exacting trade, she suggested—and Oliver immediately agreed—that payment for the supplies from the wholesale dealers should be disbursed by Miss Stebbing. The reader should realise that the Tobacco, Confectionery and Stationery are one business, and the Groceries another, that the two are different in their accountancy as stars are from planets. Purchases of tobacco, confectionery and stationery carry credit, and if

you examine the ledger of any small shopkeeper in this line you will find that each account is headed "less 10% monthly" or "less 5% pay traveller." Sometimes a superscription is as meagre as "less $1\frac{1}{4}\%$ fourteen days" and sometimes as stern as "net cash seven days." But in any case these accounts may be paid by cheque, and as such come directly under the eye of the master.

But the Groceries Department is different. Loaves of bread, bags of flour, sides of bacon, crates of eggs—these things are not matters of trust, and must be paid for on the nail. There would seem to be sound reason here. Man must eat and to that end will, if he is forced, produce the wherewithal. But he is not absolutely forced to smoke, suck sweets and write letters, and that he may be encouraged to do these things credit is given him. Or if not to him, at least to his immediate purveyor. Oliver, who did not purpose to spend his days on the doorstep waiting cash in hand for baker and bacon-factor, holding no human concourse except on the further side of a counter, willingly accepted Miss Stebbing's proposal that he should hand her twenty pounds every Monday morning, and receive an account "of same" every Saturday night.

The arrangement worked admirably, and once a week Miss Stebbing would produce a neatly ruled and figured little book, showing how such and such sums had been expended, supported by vouchers

of a clarity and accuracy which would have satisfied the Accountancy Branch of the Supplies Purchase Department of the Army Service Corps during the war. Then after a time Oliver became careless. It had always seemed to him an ungentlemanly thing to insist upon vouchers and petty receipts; and if Miss Stebbing, looking at him with that steady gaze which had won her the prize in the *Daily Sludge* Beauty Competition, assured him that she had expended seven pounds upon bread and eleven pounds upon bacon, why then, those were the sums she had expended. If, to adopt a cant phrase much in vogue at that time, he saw it in her eyes it was so. Every Saturday evening Miss Stebbing turned towards him orbs "in whose night the seven deep oceans flashed their drowned stars." A steady gaze in a man is the reflection of truth; in woman, it is the mirror of what she wants the man to believe. So Oliver got into the habit of crumpling up the vouchers without looking at them.

The takings of the shop kept up wonderfully well. £80 to £90 was the figure sworn to by Oddle. The first week of Oliver's tenure showed a turnover of £84, the second week went up to £92, the third dropped to £89. I suppose the business had been running for some three months before, for the first time, £70 was inexplicably registered.

For three months Dobbs' Stores was indeed a magnificent toy. Jerry's aid and enthusiasm were

enlisted immediately upon his return from North Wales. Never had Belladonna Road known such an orgy of window-dressing. At this time Dobbs' front-window rivalled in colour, proportion and design the choicest spectacles of Mr. C. B. Cochran. I do not know whether Adam Smith or Samuel Smiles have anywhere laid down rules for the guidance of the commencing shopkeeper, but it is certain that these economists could not have bettered those which Oliver invented for his own guidance. He bought a manual of bookkeeping and a set of account books, scarlet ruled. He procured two American *brochures* entitled *What a Shopkeeper Ought to Know* and *The Art of the Store*, and even ordered his publisher to procure for him a work, uniquely printed in Chicago, entitled *The Human Side of Retail Selling*. Finally, he sought to recast himself in that mould in which Mr. Gordon Selfridge would have made the world. Enamoured of an advertisement whose promise is that it "works while you sleep" he and Jerry determined that the advertising of Dobbs' Stores should not cease at the hour when a fatherly government decides that no shop shall keep open. They bought a little toy theatre which was installed in the middle of the front window. During the day the miniature curtain was kept rigorously down, a small placard on the prompt side announcing that it would rise that evening at eight o'clock.

The friends bought a small electric battery and lit

up the scene—ball-room, woodland, Fontainebleau, Versailles, Grandes Eaux, etc., etc.—with a splendour unknown alike to Schwabe-Hasait and Mr. Basil Dean. When the shop closed and the more ordinary wonders of the window were discreetly obscured until the following morning, the batteries were turned on and the theatre curtain was raised. The scene would be such as Madame de Pompadour would not have found inelegant. A little cardboard figure in a sky-blue dress would be accosted by a rose-coloured cavalier, ineluctably Louis Quinze. The dialogue, which a cartoonist would have represented as ballooning from their mouths, was enscribed on a neat paste-board at the foot of each figure.

“Where are you going to, my pretty maid?” would be the chevalier’s *entrée en matière*, the reply, milady’s pointed intimation that she was about to lay in supplies for the week-end at Dobbs’ Stores. The figures and the legends were changed nightly.

The cost of this advertisement was out of all proportion to the extra trade accruing thereby. You cannot titillate a sense which your public does not possess. It is doubtful whether the toy theatre produced any effect on the inhabitants of the Belladonna Road beyond the impression that Dobbs’ Stores had passed into the hands of a person of soft intellect with whom it would be unwise to trade.

CHAPTER IX

MISS STEBBING

SAMUEL JOHNSON delivered himself, in the course of his long life, of multitudinous apothegms of an exceeding sagacity. I shall quote here that one which is perhaps the wisest of them all, yet which, put into practice, would bring your novelist to penury and the grave.

“Love,” declared the great man, “is only one of many passions; and as it has no great influence upon the sum of life, it has little operation in the dramas of a poet, who caught his ideas from the living world, and exhibited only what he saw before him. He knew, that any other passion, as it was regular or exorbitant, was a cause of happiness or calamity.”

But the subscribers to your circulating library are unlike Shakespeare, and ignore alike the existence of any other passion and the meaning of the word “exorbitant.” To such a reader—and I gather from my publisher’s returns that there are no others—love is the only passion worth 2d. per volume per week. Therefore, Oliver shall here and now at least

fall into the semblance of love, and with no other person than Miss Stebbing.

The reader will remember that we declared her a beauty paralleled only by Mary Pickford. Miss Stebbing had a face to launch navies. As she walked the floor of the shop you would have said, or an Irish playwright would have said for you, that she was the Lady Helen of Troy "and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl." To a lover "the star of knowledge" could have been seen "shining from her brow," and her words had set him "thinking on the holy Brigid speaking to the infant saints." Miss Stebbing, after a week or two, perfumed the stores with her hair until, like Rafi's cell in Flecker's play of *Turkish Delight*, they "became a meadow." All Miss Stebbing's body asked without speech "Wilt thou, oh Mr. Sheldon, take me to the Cinema?"

And to the cinema, of course, Oliver took Miss Stebbing.

The façade of the picture-palace in white stone, lit up in the garish manner dear to the heart of Messrs. Lyons, was ill-balanced and out of proportion. The door, for which the proper situation was obviously the middle, was tucked away in a right wing, which was too large for its brother on the left. The wholesome plainness of the exterior was corrected, again in accordance with Jewish taste, by ornaments at once trivial and elaborate. The foyer was in marble,

prettified here and there with wallpaper imitations of that material. There was abundant gold. The carpeting of the theatre was soft to the foot and pinkish to the eye, the seating was magenta and the hangings were maroon.

Miss Stebbing was "reminded" of the Guildhall.

"On what occasion?" Oliver asked.

"When 'Is Nibs graciously presented me with the prize in the Beauty Comp. The *Daily Sludge*, you know. Vilet Campbell was second and Dysey Fothergill third."

Oliver had heard of neither of these ladies.

"Actresses?" he queried.

"Think they are," sniffed Miss Stebbing. "Vilet's in the front row at Daly's. She's the girl with the fair hair that José Collins slaps in the second act. Dysey's on the pictures."

Then the lights were lowered and the audience settled down to the business of holding hands. Across the peppermint-laden air came the title, "When Woman Woos," followed by the assurance that the picture would contain nothing which had brought the blush of shame to the cheek of Mr. T. P. O'Connor.

To say that it was sentimental drivel indistinguishable from plain imbecility is to say little.

An American millionaire (star—John Doughface) was so deeply absorbed in the pork-packing business

that he neglected his wife (star—Lulu Lollipop). So much so that after three-quarters of a pound of best chocolates had elapsed Miss Stebbing beheld the lover (star—Apollo Velvetino) kneeling at Lulu's feet with his head buried in the folds of her ball-gown. He had just declared that he and he only, possessed the key which should unlock her soul. Lulu, with her jewelled fingers stroking Velvetino's crisp curls, screamed in yellow letters on a blue ground : " Though my husband is cold to me I will remain faithful to my marriage vows ! " " What is a vow ? " retorted the youth in green upon scarlet. " You were a governess who married Doughface for his money ! " " I love my husband ! " breathed Lulu down the nape of Velvetino's neck. " Besides, have I not my son ? " (star—Monty Bounder).

At that moment Doughface entered, and, quite naturally, mistook Lulu's attitude. He dismissed the lover with curt contempt, and then proceeded to round upon his wife.

This, of course, would have been the great third act of the real stage. In the spoken drama Lulu would have reproached Doughface with his indifference, justified her passion for Velvetino (and, incidentally, made out a case for all abandoned help-meets), and announced her immediate flight. Only at the end of an exhausting half-hour would the husband have discovered that he was being dialectically fooled, that his wife had no intention of deceiving

him, and was as true and as much in love as when, years ago, she was to him "all dewy from a convent fetched."

Instead, Lulu murmured, "You do not understand," and, murmuring, was driven out into the night. . . . The reader knows the rest—how, on that very evening of the major quarrel in that New York drawing-room, the minor disturbance in Europe, known as the Great War, broke out; how Monty rushed to the colours at least two years before America came in; how Monty stopped a hero's bullet and Velvetino one destined for a cad; how Doughface, now an ambulance driver, and Lulu, now a nurse, met in a shell-hole and renewed their troth over the body of their son. And to Oliver's amazement and Miss Stebbing's entire approval, there flashed on the screen the final sub-title:

"And thus, whilst Europe was Torn
Limb from Limb
Two hearts were made Whole.
Woman had Woo'd
And Faith had Conquered."

Throughout this farrago of absurdity Miss Stebbing's hand might have served as a register of popular emotion. It trembled and shook, became limp and rigid in turns, and more than once the palm moistened with emotion. Oliver had first encountered it over the chocolate box, and it had been quickly withdrawn. "Mais Julien pensa qu'il était de son

devoir d'obtenir que l'on ne retirât pas cette main quand il la touchait."

So Oliver thought, and so, like Stendhal's hero, succeeded.

Miss Stebbing's mind was the morass normal to her class, a sentimental swamp which would have baffled exploration but for odd, unexpected stepping-stones of hard sense. She was curiously insensible to "vamps." But Lulu Lollipop had only to look out of the screen with the pained anxiety of a cow which has overrun its milking time, and on the instant Miss Stebbing became a fountain of warm, trickling melancholy.

When our hero returned that night to his bedroom over the shop, he was as much "in love" as his temperament permitted. As he unfastened his collar his thoughts ran: "She's common, but she's pretty. What about 'dainty rogue in pewter'?"

At the shop next day no allusion to the previous evening was made. The rules for gentlefolk don't apply to grocers, or Oliver might have felt some qualms as to the amount of responsibility involved. Miss Stebbing's side of the matter is quickly disposed of. Confident of her ability to "look after herself," she did not bother her pretty head about the social nuance. "Manners," as she very rightly said, "is like motor-cars—for them as can afford 'em." If Miss Stebbing was a "good" girl in the technical sense, "circumspect and right," it was not entirely

because she had a soul to keep. She had her virtue to guard—and the appearance of virtue is an asset in Belladonna Road.

Oliver decided to say nothing about the outing to Jerry Hanmer.

A fortnight later takes us to the Symposium Theatre—the home, to the discerning, of song without melody, dance without intoxication, acting without players. But Miss Stebbing had seen in the front page of the *Daily Sludge* a portrait of Kitty Klatter as Darling Bud in *Kiss of a Rose* and insisted that she must be a creature of pure delight. Not even the accompanying letterpress to the effect that in private life Kitty was a Lady Lazarus-Goldebloom bedashed, in Miss Stebbing's eyes, her glutinous glamour. The way down to the theatre was beguiled by an "appreciation" of this coagulate Jewess by the *Sludge's* "Girl in the Pit."

Oliver resigned himself to the sad imbroglio which, in this country, passes for comic opera. Act one saw the little Jewess vocal with memories of her mountain home. "Safe in Old Sardinia" and "When I feel your Arms around me" were the principal numbers here. The costume worn was as naïve as Micaela's, the manner of the singer brazen as a camp-follower's.

The second act saw Kitty rebuttive of a charge of spiritual infidelity—at the Symposium Theatre, the most proper of all houses of entertainment, the

heroine is not allowed a body with which to be unfaithful. Kitty's songs here were "As the Tree drops Gum" and "I stick to You."

The third act saw the woman ensconced in the arms of a throne, the steps of which she mounted in three-four time to the refrain "Love is a Crown of Gold."

There was hardly a moment throughout the whole evening in which Miss Stebbing's eyes were not bedimmed and bedewed. All that Oliver could see was a stoutish, middle-aged Jewess, whose accent recalled less the steppes of the Caucasus, where the libretto had decided that Bud was born, than the Whitechapel Road, where Kitty Klatter first saw the light.

Round about Oliver were Jews. The theatre swarmed with Jews. Not the elderly Jew with an obvious sense of humour and genius somewhere tucked away, but his more bodeful issue, loquacious, oiled in manner and hair.

On leaving the theatre, Oliver proposed supper. Miss Stebbing remarking that she had heard well of the Abracadabra in Shaftesbury Avenue, they repaired to that synagogue.

More Jews, Jews everywhere, seated as guests at the little tables, perambulating in chocolate and gold braid, turning syncopated somersaults on the platform of the orchestra.

The occasion was what the proprietors of the

Abracadabra called a "Muffin Knell." The menu bore the following legend :

"Knell, you may think, is a sad word to link with an Abracadabra dance-supper. Its associations are painful—decidedly painful. Passing bell—crape—body upstairs . . . quite: but the word has just one happy application. What could revive memories more delightful, what could more swiftly turn despair to hope and hope to joy than the bell that tells the passing—of the Muffin Man?"

When the Muffin Man came round, he took out of his basket a fan, or other meaningless favour, which he offered to each guest in turn. Streamers were thrown, which was the signal for an orgy of discomfort. Miss Stebbing did not commit any of those offences of the toilet for which she declared women should be publicly whipped; throughout the whole meal she was content for her lips, eyebrows and complexion to remain as God had made them. Oliver felt his liking for the girl increase with every course—a triumph in these days when so many women eat a losing supper.

Miss Stebbing thanked Oliver for a pleasant evening and declined his offer to see her home.

"What d'you suppose the street'ud think," she said, "if they saw me and a handsome young man coming home together at this hour of the night?"

She allowed him, however, to put her into a taxi, and hold her hand for a moment over the closed door.

Oliver walked home in a state of mind which I shall not attempt to justify. He liked the girl; she was capable of appreciating the preposterousness of the world around them.

“There’s a pheasant worth shooting,” she had said of some bedizened chorus-girl. “Must have poured the flour bin on her face before coming out.”

Miss Stebbing dressed uncommonly well too; a good deal better than her wage of two pounds ten shillings per week would seem to justify. But she had already explained that. Her mother, it appeared, had secretly possessed a small property in the North of Ireland which brought in some hundred and twenty pounds a year.

“Say two pounds a week,” she had said, “after allowing for repairs.” This money, on her mother’s death, had been left to her. “Knowing,” as Miss Stebbing had put it, “as Dad would only drink it. So he’s never been told. A lawyer in the city draws it for me once a quarter.”

The candour of this admission had pleased Oliver. There had been something refreshing in the absence of any attempt to conceal a fortune known, probably, to the whole of Miss Stebbing’s street except her father. The confidence made Oliver free, as it were, of Belladonna Road. This information had been followed by an admission uttered with hesitancy and something less of the girl’s normal self-confidence,—to the effect that her father was a man of

great violence of temper, and subject now and again to attacks of ungovernable jealousy and suspicion.

"Like as not," she had said, "he will come here one of these fine days and try to put you against me. Dad suspects that I have some money, but he doesn't know how much. Stepmother's always plaguing him to find out. Mother never told him that she had anything, and I don't tell him. I don't tell him what I'm getting at the shop, neither. Like as not he'll come here one of these fine mornings and try to find out. Kidding that I'm robbing you 'ull be his game."

Oliver had promised faithfully not to "let on," either as to fortune or wages.

He continued his way along Oxford Street, past Marble Arch and up the Edgware Road in the state of mind familiar to lovers of Stephen Phillips's *Marpessa*. Wounded with beauty in the Autumn night, young Oliver, like Idas, tossed upon his couch, and cried: "Miss Stebbing, O Miss Stebbing!" From the dark the floating smell of invisible groceries, the mystic yearning of that tobacco-laden front shop into his brain wandered, until he rose and outward leaned in the Belladonna Road. . . .

CHAPTER X

TAKING STOCK

STOCKTAKING was an “eye-opener.” That is to say it should have opened the eyes of anyone possessed of an arithmetical temperament or rudimentary common sense.

It took place on a Saturday, three months after Oliver began business, and from eight o'clock in the evening, when the shop shut, until six on the Sunday afternoon he and Jerry were plunged in the intricate business, up to the armpits, jackets off and sleeves rolled up.

The method of their calculations was as follows. First they took an enormous sheet of paper and wrote at the head of it :

DOBBS' STORES

STOCKTAKING

Next :

Cash in Bank on Purchase . .	£250	0	0
Value of Stock on Purchase . .	300	0	0
Total . .	£550	0	0

P

Beneath this :

Cash in Bank at Stocktaking	.	£197	10	0
∴ O. is apparently poorer				
by	.	£250	0	0
		197	10	0
		£52	10	0
		£52	10	0

“Don’t like the look of it,” said Jerry.

“Rot !” Oliver retorted. “Miss Stebbing says we’ve got a lot more stock. Haven’t we, Miss Stebbing ?”

That young lady, appealed to, said that in her opinion the stock was “up.”

“Well, let’s see what we owe.”

The file of bills due was overhauled and the amounts added up.

“Forty-five pounds, six shillings,” announced Oliver.

“Add that to fifty-two pounds, ten shillings, and we’re ninety-seven pounds, sixteen shillings to the bad,” said Jerry.

“Less book - debts, six pounds,” countered the owner of the shop.

So they made a further entry :

O. is apparently poorer by	.	.	£52	10	0
Plus	£45	6	0		
Less	6	0	0		
	£39	6	0	39	6 0
∴ Loss to date	.	.	£91	16	0

“What it comes to is this,” said Jerry. “If our stock is ninety pounds more than when you bought the show you’ve neither made nor lost.”

“No,” replied Oliver. “That’s not quite right. I’ve drawn four pounds a week out of the business for thirteen weeks. So if we’ve ninety pounds more stock we’ve made fifty-two quid.”

“Well, let’s take it down and see,” returned Jerry, now very business-like.

“Of course,” said Miss Stebbing, fidgeting from one shapely foot to the other, “you can’t judge from the first three months. It’s not how you’ve *done*, but how you’re shaping now.”

Jerry, a trifle sharply, said that of course the shop must have made money.

“It’s not certain,” said Miss Stebbing. “Waterhouse down the road is telling everybody how bad he’s been doing lately.”

The two friends were as determined to find £390 worth of stock “between” the two shops as ever astronomer was to locate his predicted star. They began on the sweets which registered a total of £47.

“That’s a little down,” said Oliver, with a shade of anxiety in his voice.

“I expect tobacco is up,” said Miss Stebbing, “we have been ordering pretty freely.”

Tobacco was up and worked out at £50.

“ That’s £97 altogether,” said Jerry. “ What was it last time, Noll ? ”

“ £100,” said Oliver, “ we’re three quid down.”

“ Get it back on the stationery,” said the optimistic assistant, who throughout had seemed bent upon representing weights and measures at their most favourable. But stationery, as becomes a non-temperamental business, proved constant and £30 showed no change.

“ That’s £127 altogether,” said Jerry, “ you’ve got to get £260 out of the blooming currants. Bet we don’t ! ”

Oliver looked a little glum. Miss Stebbing was again of the opinion that even if you lost when first you took over the business, the thing to do was not to cry over spilt milk but to put your shoulder to the wheel.

“ What has been has been,” she declared. “ It’s no good moping even if we haven’t done as well as we ought.”

It was in despondent mood that the final inquisition was begun. Those of my readers who have not kept a grocery shop will have no idea of the enormous amount of groceries represented by £260. Big or little, the fact remains that the £260 were not there. With the last tin of salmon, the last packet of Twink, the last bottle of Oxo, the last tin of H.P. counted, there remained a grocery total of £110.

This brought the total value of the stock to £237.

With long faces the friends went back to their sheet of foolscap and wrote :

Original Value of Stock	.	£300	0	0
Present Value of Stock	.	237	0	0
∴ Loss on Stock	.	£63	0	0
Add loss to date as above	.	91	16	0
Loss	.	£154	16	0
Less Drawings	.	52	0	0
Grand Total Loss	.	£102	16	0

“Bad egg,” said Oliver, “I can’t understand it.”

“Rotten,” agreed Jerry, “but we’ve *got* to understand it.”

“You look tired, Miss Stebbing,” remarked Oliver, “you’d better go home and have a cup of tea. Mr. Hanmer and I will worry it out somehow.”

“I’ll come back later,” said Miss Stebbing, “if I can help you at all.”

Her lip trembled.

“Do,” said Oliver. “Never mind church for once in a way.”

"It's serious," said Jerry. "From what I can see, Dobbs' Stores needs all the 'Lead Kindly Light' that's going."

Miss Stebbing began a remark, brushed her eyes with the back of her hand and rushed from the room.

"She's a good soul," said Oliver.

"You're a fool," retorted Jerry. "Let's go into these accounts."

And into the accounts they went. They made sure that the loss had actually been incurred in trading. That is to say Jerry, who was not such a dud at figures as his friend, ascertained that the sum of £250 really had stood to Oliver's credit in the Bank after all the expenses incidental to moving into the shop had been incurred. He made certain that Oliver had not drawn upon this sum for any private expenditure. Work it out which way they would, the loss of £102. 16s. 0d. stared them in the face absolute, and not to be denied.

"Of course there was Arthur," said Oliver, and he recounted how a fortnight previously a neighbouring shopkeeper, one of the friendly ones who least resented the newcomer's gentlemanly intrusion, had approached him with an air of profound mystery.

"See this 'ere note," he had said. "What do you reckon to pay your assistants as they can afford to change five pun' notes at my shop?"

"You sacked him of course?" asked Jerry.

"Yes," Oliver replied, "and incurred his mother's street-long enmity."

"If he had ten bob a week right from the start, that's only six pound ten," Jerry said. "No, my boy, there's a leakage, and a bad one, and it's got to be stopped here and now, or six months'll see you in Carey Street."

"You know, Jerry," said Oliver, "perhaps I'm not really cut out for a grocer."

"We won't go into that," replied his friend. "A grocer you are, and unless you look spry a grocer you won't remain."

But underneath his chaff there was something of anxiety.

Oliver decided to make his future drawings three pounds a week instead of four.

The question might be raised: was there no background to Oliver's life? Had he no relatives? no friends? The answer to the first question is none, and to the second again none, with the exception of Jerry.

It is a lonely life which the unsuccessful writer leads, mewed up in that prison which is his work-room. Oliver's books began to make a show, but it was a show on a fly-leaf, and alas! nowhere else. Still, it was good to take his last volume down from the shelf and read in a little square, neat as a

tombstone, in the top left-hand corner of the fly-leaf :

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NOVELS

GUSTO

OZYMANDIAS: NEWSPAPER BUG

HELL AND BAYSWATER

ESSAYS

TUCK AND SENNET

TURTLE AND JAY

TEREBINTH AND CAPSICUM

IMPRESSIONS OF THE THEATRE

GOD'S BODYKINS !

BY 'R LAKIN

An engaging cemetery, this !

What had these children of his brain amounted to, in cash and in reputation ? Oliver was in the habit, in moments of discouragement, of jotting down the amounts on odd bits of paper, though he knew their sum quite perfectly by heart. On the morning following the stock-taking consultation—to which Miss Stebbing had returned unhelpfully—Oliver took his writing-pad and once more made dejected calculation. The three novels published with Spider Smith had brought him in £7, £11 and £109,—this last amount being wrested, thanks to the deceptive title, from the public's misplaced prurience. One book of

literary essays, published with Altruists Ltd., and quite exquisitely bound and printed, had brought £30, and the two others done with Sworder had realised £26 and £31. The *Impressions of the Theatre*, published with Spry & Leary on a partnership basis—commercial houses are notoriously shy of assuming sole responsibility for anything which looks like dramatic criticism—had resulted in a loss on the two volumes of £17. Net profit, less cost of typing—£101. He had started writing, not counting his *Œuvres de Jeunesse*, when he was twenty-four. He was now thirty-eight. Fourteen into one hundred and one pounds—he worked the sum out exactly.

$$\begin{array}{r}
 14 \overline{) 101(7.4.3\frac{1}{2}} \\
 \underline{98} \\
 3 \\
 20 \\
 \underline{60} \\
 56 \\
 \underline{4} \\
 12 \\
 \underline{48} \\
 42 \\
 \underline{6}
 \end{array}$$

£7. 4s. 3½d. had been Oliver's annual wage as author throughout the last fourteen years.

I would not have it thought that the young man had been without encouragement. A great critic had written of him :

“Or he puts into my mind the image of a certain dealer in gems and ivories—not even wild Hippocampelephantocameli (to quote a monster out of the Sheldon bestiary) would drag his name from me. My friend the dealer is so passionately attached to his sapphires and cameos that he weeps to part with them. Sooner than dispose of them at a price unworthy of them, he will bestow them for no charge. His attitude towards his opals is sheer flirtation—not unblushing philandery, but a dark reciprocity of spiritual kisses. This is precisely Mr Sheldon’s attitude towards his words. He takes his words into corners and fondles them, holds them up to the lamplight and turns them round, blazing.”

But this blast of eloquence did not blow a single customer into the bookseller’s. Once Mr. Eves Dropper of the *Daily Sludge* had called him a “rising young writer,” but the effect upon his sales had not been noticeable.

The future seemed gloomy enough. He had a novel on hand three-quarters completed, with the attractive title *Diana Vanity*. Dinah Vane was the girl’s real name. She was a lassie who worked at the pit-head of a Durham colliery. Lord Huntingtower loved her wildly, but she clove to her ebon “Geordie.” One day the poor boy was trapped in

the mine, and when Huntingtower brought him to the surface it was a dead body which he held in his arms. Dinah lost her reason and wandered into the open country-side and the night. Two years elapse. When Huntingtower finds her again she is starring in musical comedy as Diana Vanity. Leaping from box to stage Huntingtower clasps her in his arms, breaks her contract with her manager, and sends her to a private nursing home, where sweet reason is restored. Out of gratitude she marries Huntingtower, but "cherishes in her bosom a faded rose—the rose of memory." But this consummation was not more than outlined—scenario-wise.

One day Oliver showed his MS., out of idle curiosity, to Miss Stebbing. She read, and pronounced enchantingly.

"Why don't you print it?" she asked.

"Because it's muck, dear Miss Stebbing, M-U-C-K. I don't know that I shall finish it, even."

CHAPTER XI

THE PLOT THICKENS

THERE will be no more "accounts" in this story. Or not many. Accounts are essentially undemocratic, and were invented by the moneyed classes for a solace. Yet though they are to plague the reader no more, they were an increasing worry to Oliver, who began to perceive that a hundred pounds-worth of invoices is the same thing as a withdrawal from the bank of like amount.

His spirits suffered alternations of ebb and flow, but a great deal more of ebb than of the other thing. There was the day when he discovered that Henry, the front shop assistant who had succeeded Arthur, had apparently effected in five months, out of two pounds a week, the wherewithal to buy himself a motor-bicycle and two new suits of clothes. It was Miss Stebbing who drew Oliver's attention to this instance of unparalleled thrift.

At the first hint of inquiry Henry "took himself off," but not before he had roundly accused his employer of blackmail and "deformation" of character.

To Henry succeeded Edward ; after the manner of the Kings of England.

One day Miss Stebbing appeared at the door of the grocery department and said :

“ Oh, Mr. Sheldon, Dad wants me to tell you that he’s coming round to see you after dinner. Out on the spree last night, and his old ball o’ lead’s no use to him to-day.”

One of Miss Stebbing’s accomplishments, resorted to in her gayer moods, was a flow of rhyming slang.

“ His temper’s something awful. He always gets on to my money when he’s like that. So mind you don’t let on about how much I draw here, or how much I told you Mother’s money came to.”

Oliver promised.

Mr. Stebbing put in his appearance at the door of the front shop not after dinner, but as soon as the groceries had shut down, and Miss Stebbing, after hanging up the much be-thumbed card “ Closed between 1 and 2 o’clock ” had departed.

Contrary to expectation Stebbing had nothing of the drunkard about him. He looked the typical respectable and self-respecting man of the working classes.

“ It’s this way,” he began, after the usual civilities had passed and he had taken the chair in the inner room which Oliver offered.

“ It’s this way, sir. I’m anxious about my girl. She’s spending a heap too much money.”

Oliver shrugged his shoulders, as though to indicate that this could not possibly be his affair.

“Wait a bit, sir. What you give my daughter is your business and her’s, and not mine. She doesn’t tell what her wages are, and I’ve not come here to ask. At the same time I know that they can’t be three quid. No shop could stand it. Now what we and her mother, leastways her step-mother, wants to know is: Where does she get the money for all those chocolates and seats at the theatre and new clothes and fal-lals? She’s had six pairs of silk stockings at twenty-five shillings a pair in the last two months to her mother’s knowledge.”

Stebbing paused.

“What I’ve come to ask, sir, is: Are your accounts all right?”

This was sheer, downright impertinence. To ask one question in the hope of getting the answer to another is an old trick of the lower classes. Oliver remembered how Jack o’ Bob’s would spend a whole hour haggling over the price of a bullock when what he really wanted to discover was the price of a shire gelding. Stebbing’s question was obviously a trap.

“That, Mr. Stebbing, I think is my affair.” It sounded artificial, stilted, like a sentence in a novel, but he could think of nothing else.

“Not altogether, sir, if I may make so bold. We have a right to know if our girl’s respectable or not.”

Here, then, was the attempt at calumny of which Miss Stebbing had warned him. From Oliver was to be drawn the incautious reply that Miss Stebbing's expenditure was to be measured, not only against wages, but against so and so many pounds a year left to her by her mother. Most decidedly that was the line. Or, as Miss Stebbing would say, "most one-sidedly."

Oliver rose.

"I think, Mr. Stebbing, that you must allow me to be the judge of my own business affairs, and of your daughter's honesty in connection with them. I am perfectly satisfied both as to the correctness of my accounts and your daughter's handling of them."

"Well," said Mr. Stebbing slowly and fumbling with his cap, "you can't say as I haven't warned you. But blow me if I can see where she gets all that money from!"

With that he took a respectful departure.

"Doesn't look like a drunkard," mused Oliver, as he gazed after the retreating figure.

"It's all right, Miss Stebbing," he sang out from the inner room, as that young lady unlocked the shop-door and began her preparations for the afternoon tide of groceries. "Your father got nothing out of me! By the way, he was frightfully sober."

"He's like that sometimes," said Miss Stebbing, coming reassuredly into the sanctum. "And then

240 BLESSED ARE THE RICH

he turns on the tap. I expect he's gone for a ball of chalk down the frog and toad."

"A *what*?"

"A walk down the road. Hope it keeps fine for him."

She hesitated.

"I suppose he told you you were too trustworthy, put too much confidence in other people?"

"He did hint something of the sort."

"He would. Dad's like that. Talks round-shouldered, never straight out. Always hints his meaning."

And Miss Stebbing went back to her department, singing :

"O may the Lord send down a dove
With wings as sharp as a razor
To cut the throat . . ."

The ditty was interrupted by a customer calling for a quarter of cheese. The purchase made and the bell signifying that the customer had departed, Miss Stebbing's voice could be heard in cheerful conclusion :

". . . of that blooming goat
The Company-Sergeant-Major!"

Which might have indicated that Miss Stebbing had, at one period, kept company with His Majesty's Forces.

Oliver related the scene with gusto the next time that Jerry came to see him.

"You always were a fool, Noll," was the only comment his friend would make.

Towards the end of November a shop on the opposite side of the road, which had stood empty since Oliver had "taken over," became the scene of that activity which betokens a new tenant. The place, which had been a milliner's, was gutted and restored in ominous-looking oak. The decorations were forbiddingly churchy. Finally a sign-painter spent a morning putting up the name :

EDWIN HASTE

and the afternoon in adding these qualifications of despair :

FURNISHING UNDERTAKER

CREMATIONS AND EMBALMING

Funerals Arranged and Carried out at Moderate Prices

Day and Night Service

When the shutters were taken down and the shop was formally opened, a child's coffin, a crematory urn, a model of a grave with a marble cross and a marble edging, and a photograph of a Haste cortège were horrifically displayed. Next morning when Oliver pulled up his blind he read the legend, white upon blue enamel :

YOU MAY TELEPHONE FROM HERE.

And for such time as Oliver remained the owner of Dobbs' Stores his mind was melancholied with

thought of that dreadful traffic. From his bedroom window he could see over the panelling into the interior of the shop, and note the progress of the "casket," from the rough shell to that French-polished symbol of universal annihilation. In fancy he could peer into the mortuary, or back of the shop, where the bodies of the class which lives in one room are kept pending burial. In fancy he could overhear the confabulations of the visitors who came for a last "look at the departed." Was there not a whole condemnation of the capitalist system in that removal to a common repository, and the hasty putting-back on the morning of the funeral? To telephone from those dread precincts seemed a ghoulish business. Perhaps clients had some little hint to give the Recording Angel?

In vain did Oliver repeat Sir Walter Raleigh's majestic refrain beginning :

"O eloquent, just and mighty Death!"

down to :

". . . thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet!*"

Not even the sublimity of the cadence could entirely exorcise the physical and spiritual repugnance which Oliver felt at the idea of death. Or

perhaps not so much at the idea of the monster as at its neighbourliness. To keep one's own dying at arm's length is one thing; to have the deaths of other people, and the intolerable remainder, within arm's length is another. There were days when a motor-car of the flimsier sort, whose apparent use was the dissemination of "literature," would station itself outside the block of offices next door to the undertaker's. When the car came from the direction of Paddington it presented to Oliver's astonished gaze two panels bearing the legends: "Christ died for the Ungodly" and "Peace through the Blood of His Cross." When the approach was from Notting Hill the inscriptions were the old threat: "The Wages of Sin is Death," and the familiar incitation "The Gift of God is Eternal Life."

The Christmas trade was good. Oliver found a firm in Paternoster Row which was willing to give him three months' credit. He laid in one hundred and twenty pounds' worth of toys, perfumes, fancy soaps, bead necklaces, sachets, handkerchief-cases, wallets, tobacco-pouches, crackers. He sold two-thirds of these at $33\frac{1}{3}\%$ profit. That is to say he sold goods for which he had promised to pay £80 for £107. What he did not realise was that the remaining £40 worth would be dead stock until the following Christmas, and that, including breakages, shop-soil and change in taste, he would be lucky to sell out for half of what they had cost. A fair

statement would show that he bought £120 worth of goods and would probably sell them for £127. But since, when the next Christmas came round, Dobbs' Stores did not belong to Oliver these figures were never put to the proof. In the meantime his bank balance was replenished to the tune of over a hundred pounds, and his pile of bills augmented by one for a hundred and twenty pounds. So that, at the end of the three months, when the account from the house in Paternoster Row fell due, Oliver would be exactly thirteen pounds out of pocket on the Christmas trading, with a problematical stock of forty pounds on his shelves unsaleable for another nine months.

I promised at the beginning of this chapter that there should be no more accounts, and therefore I am not going to present the reader with a detailed analysis of that painful end-of-February stock-taking. Sufficient if I say that Oliver came to the conclusion, Jerry corroborating, that the mysterious leakage, noted in the November stock-taking, had not abated. On the contrary it had increased. The net loss on the three months was £253. 10s. 0d.

"Looks to me, Noll," said Jerry, "that you're jolly well broke."

"Broke, Jerry?"

"Broke! B-R-O-K-E, Noll. Broke! 'Hearts of Oak,' as Miss Stebbing would say. You've got £140 in the bank, and your bills come to £280. That's what I call broke."

From the pavement outside came the quavering notes of Raff's *Cavatina*.

"Blast it," said Oliver, whose nerves were pretty well on edge, "send the fellow away!"

He pushed half-a-crown into Jerry's hand.

When Jerry came back he found his old friend with his head on his arms and his shoulders shaking.

"Steady, old man," he said.

"Steady be blowed!" Oliver replied, "I'm all right."

"Here's two bob," said Jerry, "I gave the old boy a tanner. You can't afford even that. I don't like the look of things at all. Let's go into committee."

And into committee they went.

They debated whether there could be anything wrong with Oliver's shop-manner.

"I'm not often in the shop, and I can't help keeping myself *to* myself, as they say. Too shy to ask after Mrs. Smith's rheumatism and Mrs. Jones's catarrh."

"D'you ever have any rows," asked Jerry.

"Well, not real ones. Of course it's my shop and I run it in my own way. There's that matter of the *Daily Sludge*, for instance."

"What's that?"

"You remember the 'Fatmah' case?"

"The woman who killed her Turkish husband? Yes, I remember."

" Well, after the woman was acquitted the *Sludge* printed on its front page in big type ' Terrific Scenes in the Great Trial. Madame Fatmah Interviewed. Praise for British Justice.' All headlines you know. Then this, ' The released victim of a savage's unspeakable lust had so far recovered last night as to be able to enjoy a meal which included oysters, a grilled leg of chicken, and a bottle of Burgundy.' Of course I couldn't allow my shop to sell that sort of thing, and so I stopped taking the paper."

" Why ? "

" Because dirt's dirt ! "

" What about the *Sludge's* regular readers ? "

" They had to lump it ! "

" Meaning they went elsewhere for the paper ? "

" I suppose so."

After a couple of hours checking and counter-checking—all of it perfectly useless since no alteration could be made in the figures—the friends fell silent.

Jerry was the first to speak.

" It's this way, old man," he said. " You've enough in the Bank to pay outstanding bills supposing you decrease your stock by £140. That means trading on just over £100 worth of stock, or else running up credits which you've no capital to meet. And in any case you can't afford to make another pennyworth of loss."

" I don't mean to," said Oliver firmly. " When I've

finished *Diana Vanity*, I mean to buckle to and keep the shop myself, if I must."

"I see," replied Jerry slowly. "So that's what you've been doing! While the cat scribbled upstairs, the mice nibbled the stock."

"It's good muck, Jerry, and ought to be a seller. I've done sixty thousand words."

"I see. Much shall be forgiven him because he has written much. But I doubt if Roberts & Coldwell will forgive you a bob, or the Rate Collector forego a farthing. Don't be a fool, Noll!"

"I tell you it's good rubbish!"

"How long is it to be?"

"Ninety thousand."

"And you've done sixty in six months!"

"That's including interruptions."

"Ye gods! he calls his business an interruption. Noll, ye're a blasphemer. You'd have done better to cut the cackle and get down to the groceries."

Oliver smiled the fatuous smirk of the contented artist.

"I really do think I'll catch on this time," he said, "Diana's a film-star, you see, and all that sort of bilge, and the Great Heart of the B.P. will just wallow in her."

"Oh, will it? And in the meantime the Official Reeiver will go paddling in your business with his damned fingers. . . . What's the quotation?"

"Hamlet. By the way, have you read Edith

Whorple's latest atrocity—*Mongeeese*, I think she calls it? Anyhow it begins:

'God paddled in my bowels. Spake I not.
Incestuous cats, wailing the blanched night,
God paddle now in yours that ye be dumb!'"

"Very funny, Noll, but shall we get back to Dobbs' Stores?"

And so again to earth, and the sheets of foolscap. After a bit Jerry said:

"How long would it take you to finish Diana Thingummy if you were to go away to, say to Biarritz, and swot at it, without interruptions, as you call them?"

"A month."

"You shall have it, only I suggest Southend. Cheaper, you know. You see, it just fits."

"What fits?"

"The month. My folk, people, bosses—I never know what to call the Lauries—are going to the South of France for a month. You'll go to Southend. I shall stay at home and mind the shop. Mind it? I shall live shop, sleep shop, eat and drink shop, and I'll know where that leakage is before you've done another ten thousand."

"My dear Jerry, you're a trump."

"My dear Noll, I'm the ace, king, queen to ten with my lead to three no trumps doubled. And whoever's responsible for the leak has made a damned bad call. Ask Yarborough, or any of 'em."

And so it was settled. The following Monday morning saw Oliver installed in that Southend caravanserai which is some people's idea of an earthly paradise, and confronts a leakage of ocean almost as monstrous as that which Jerry now set himself seriously to plumb.

CHAPTER XII

JERRY THE SLEUTH

FOR three weeks Oliver's confabulation with the Muse was undisturbed. On the fourth Monday of his visit to Southend the following letter arrived bearing the Belladonna Road postmark.

DOBBS' STORES,
Sunday morning.

DEAR NOLL,

Whosoever would save his shop, before all things it is necessary he consult Jerry Hanmer. Jerry has found the leakage which is not one leakage but three leakages, all of them perfectly comprehensible and, but for his intervention, eternal. Yet they are not co-equal. They are of three kinds and sizes. They were created of one Oliver Sheldon's incapacity as a grocer, begotten of his business laxity and the woeful habit of writing novels upstairs, but thank Heaven they are no longer proceeding. Let Jerry now divide the leakages without confounding the persons.

In plain English, Noll, you have been losing money in three ways :

WASTE
PILFERING
ORGANISED ROBBERY

The people who have been cheating you are three—Edward, your front-shop assistant, Charles, the dirty-nosed infant who delivers your morning newspapers, and, as I always suspected, Miss Stebbing. Let me deal with these in order.

WASTE

Your shop is filthy. There is enough butter on the floor behind the counter to make a slide. You lose thirty shillings on each side of bacon owing to improper cutting. Bacon should be boned. Cheese should be wired, and care taken that each customer gets his share of the rind. When I took over, more than the profit on each cheese was allowed to crumble away. Your half-pound bags of sugar are nearly an ounce overweight. So much for the groceries; now for the front-shop.

In large mixed chocolates your boy always gives one too many and sometimes two. He keeps his packets of chocolate in such a mess that when they get dirty he is ashamed of offering them, and they have to be broken up and sold at 4d. a quarter. He appears to have no notion of keeping his window fresh. He puts £10 worth of stuff into it, lets it go stale, and then gives it away. He has no idea of cutting tobacco. His floor behind the counter is ankle-deep in note-paper, envelopes, and packets of cigarettes, muddled and trodden under foot. You do not know to within £15 how your newspaper-accounts stand.

Taking both shops together your lighting bills are so big that I had the pipes overhauled. There has

been an escape of gas on the outside roof going on for months, and on such a scale that the difference between your summer and your winter consumption is negligible. You have allowed Edward to breakfast every morning at your expense. I was curious enough to inspect one of his meals—half-a-pound of your choicest ham, three eggs, and your best apple jelly. Miss Stebbing has been giving afternoon tea-parties to her friends.

I calculate that Waste alone has swallowed up every penny of profit you may have made.

PILFERING

Edward is more honest than your other boy, Henry. That is to say he has bought an ordinary push-bicycle and only one suit of clothes. His method is the elementary one of putting his hand in the till whenever he feels like it, and taking as much money as he wants. Of course he never dreams of paying for his fags, nor, I think, do any of his chums pay for theirs. We can put a pound a week down to Edward's account, perhaps more. The infant who delivers the morning papers has a friend to help him, and they share a small packet of Gold Flake every morning. On wet days he bribes the postman to do the streets farthest away. Postie gets a large Players for this. The other morning I caught him blackmailing the kid. Postman said it was wet, Kid said it wasn't. Postman said he was short of fags, Kid said there was a new boss. Both scooted when they twigged that I was listening.

ORGANISED ROBBERY

And now, Noll, I'm coming to the thing which will hurt. Your Miss Stebbing is a thief, a persistent, systematic thief. The books which she presents for your inspection every Saturday night, and which you are too gentlemanly or too damned careless to examine, are faked. I hardly blame the girl; it's entirely your own fault. Don't you realise that rich people are honest simply because they have so many temptations to be honest? Don't you know that the poor folk are not dishonest but predatory? If you're such a fool as to leave money lying about, they're not going to be such fools as not to take it. Archie Muggridge taught me this, and I've never forgotten it.

I've made some inquiries during the last few days and I find it to be an axiom in shopkeeping circles that nine out of every ten assistants will pilfer to the exact amount for which they are allowed the opportunity. (Of course there are some honest fellows in the working classes just as, among our lot after the war, there were some honest, conscientious officers on the Disposal Boards.)

What else can you expect? You pay these wretches two pounds or two pounds ten a week, and when they've nothing to do they idle away their time looking at front-page advertisements in the newspapers on the counter. There Miss Stebbing sees a column headed :

London Lingers over Lovely Lingerie
festooned on each side with silk stockings, silk

nighties, undies, frillies *et hoc genus deshabilité*. She opens the paper and reads the fashion-notes. There has been a drawing-room, perhaps, or a big wedding, and the dresses act on her empty head like whisky on an empty stomach. She remembers that creation in apricot georgette which she saw last night at the Galeries Lafayette on her way back from the Palladium. It was marked "only seven guineas." Well, she thinks you're a rich man and that you won't miss "only seven guineas." She can do it in a month. Two pounds a week for the first three weeks and a pound in the last. Expectation whirls her round, and *she's going to have that frock*. I hardly blame her.

Edward sees something not less tempting. A wireless set, perhaps, or a motor-bike on the instalment system.

No, I don't blame either of them. They have simply wanted the things which the age dangles before them and denies them the means of getting. So they just went and took, the same way that France grabbed the Ruhr.

Now I've got it in my head that you rather like this Stebbing girl. She's done you right and left of course, but that's merely feminine. If she was a man she'd steal from you, and hate and despise you just because she'd stolen from you. But being a woman she probably counts it another bond between you. I've no doubt that if she were your wife she would steal for you just as devotedly as now she does the other thing. By the way what are your intentions? Strictly dishonourable? I remember my father catching me kissing a pretty housemaid.

He called me into his study.

“Are you going to marry that woman, Gerald?” he asked.

I replied that such were not my intentions.

“Is she your mistress?”

“No.”

“Well,” my father said, “you’ve got to do one thing or the other, or else she must go. I won’t have any damned shilly-shallying.”

What are you going to do about Miss Stebbing, Noll? Just shilly-shally, I suppose, as you’ve always done. Forgive me if this isn’t my business. But the affairs of a damned fool are always his friend’s business.

Now, of course, you want to know *how* this girl’s been doing you? It’s perfectly simple. I found it all out at the end of the second week.

You give her £20 every Monday morning to pay for the bread, bacon, flour, eggs, etc.,—all the things for which you pay cash on delivery. The bacon man brings a side of bacon, delivers it with a receipt and gets paid, say £6. 5s. 6d. What is there easier than to add a 1 to the 5, so that the bill read £6. 15s. 6d? And ten bob goes into Miss Stebbing’s pocket. She has noticed that you are too much the gentleman to check the receipts, that you crumple them up and throw them into the waste-paper basket. I’ve seen you do it, myself. After a time she gets bolder and alters 6 into 7 as well, and so puts thirty shillings into her pocket. The egg-man and the flour-fellow, who both give receipts, get treated in the same way.

The bread-man doesn’t give receipts—he gives loaves. Say she takes in twelve shillings’ worth. There’s nothing whatever to prevent her putting

down twenty-four bob, or any amount which takes her fancy. For the whole of the first week I myself paid out every penny over the counter. As soon as I told her that I proposed to do this she gave a start, went very red and said that she hoped it would keep fine for me.

But she's 'cute. When I asked her for her book she said she'd lost it, but would get a new one out of the Stationery and rule it for me.

Of course, I went to your accounts to see what you pay out every day, but found merely a weekly entry :

Miss Stebbing	.	.	£20	1	6
„	„	.	.	19	8 11

and so on.

Well, at the end of the first week I found that my disbursements amounted to just under ten pounds. I said nothing to Miss Stebbing and let her carry on herself during the next week. Her book showed a shilling or two over ten pounds !

I asked her how she accounted for the sudden drop in both weeks.

“ They're on strike at the clothing factory,” she said. “ They come out now and again, and that always means a drop in our takings.”

I looked up her takings and found that in both weeks they were lower by exactly one pound where, of course, they should have been lower by ten !

I've got all the proof I want. I've had returns made from all the people whom Miss Stebbing has been paying over the counter. Between them they average just over ten pounds a week.

That girl has been putting ten pounds of your money into her pocket every seven days. My second week here must have put her in a fearful quandary. She didn't dare to go on with her thieving; at the same time how was she to account for a drop to ten pounds instead of twenty? Last week she showed receipts and amounts to the tune of eighteen pounds, or an increase of eight quid. But her takings also showed an increase of eight quid. I imagine that she carted the stuff away and paid for it out of her own pocket.

Still, she knows she's caught, and I admire her pluck. She looks me straight in the face, and once or twice I've thought she was going to say something. Perhaps she's keeping her confession for you. One thing I can't quite understand, and that's what she does with the money.

You see, old boy, you've lost altogether three hundred and fifty pounds. We've set off the profit you ought to have made against the waste, so all that three hundred and fifty represents pure stealing. Put the lads in the front shop down for a hundred of it. That leaves two hundred and fifty for Miss Stebbing in twenty-five weeks, or ten pounds a week. This corresponds exactly with the discrepancy in her book.

Now where has all that gone to? Not on her back, not in theatre-tickets, not in chocolates. She doesn't read Smiles, so she can't have been "putting-by." There's something queer about it all; of that I feel sure.

I hope you'll approve the next step. I've arranged with Feldmann & Lowe to send young Cohen,

their managing clerk, down to the shop to-morrow week, Monday, to help us sift all this. You, with your infernal sentiment, can't be trusted, and it's not fair to shove the responsibility on to me. The proper thing to do is to let young Cohen sort it all out, and then you can decide what steps you are going to take. There may be something more in all this than I think. I find it hard to believe that the girl's a common prig, and no more.

In the meantime you are not to come back till Monday. I don't want you to see Miss Stebbing again until we've got her in the room with Cohen. Just put "Finis" to that novel of yours, and bring your mind back to real life.

Your faithful sleuth,

JERRY.

Now I suppose that if Oliver had been "really" in love with Miss Stebbing he would have come storming back to town, having carefully scattered the sheets of his so-nearly completed masterpiece to such winds and waves as may be found hurtling Southend pier. But he was not in love. The tender passion is a much rarer thing in life than most of our novelists and their women-readers would have us suppose. There have been writers who have recognised this, who have not asked us to contemplate an inflamed Mr. Shandy, or a distraught Mr. Bennet. Oliver liked Miss Stebbing. She was an agreeable presence to have flitting about the shop, and, by an easy transition, about his hearth,

People who have lived a purely bourgeois existence make too much of marriage. Perhaps to them it means more. Marriage to them means an unlocking of all the doors of intimacy, whereas to two people living cheek by jowl, as Oliver and this girl had done for six months, there can hardly be any doors left to unlock. Oliver liked her cheerful presence. Miss Stebbing had brought order to the piggery upstairs. Whenever he had mislaid pen or tobacco-pouch, she would exclaim :

“ It’s in your own putting ; that’s why you can’t find it.”

At first Miss Stebbing had kept house for him, by which is meant exactly what is said, and no more. Later she had made his bed for him in the morning, and enlivened his supper with her chatter. *Bon souper, bon gîte*—the rest had followed. Miss Stebbing had been his mistress for exactly three weeks. And then his ardour had cooled.

Miss Stebbing was now twenty, what would she be like at forty ? But that is a question which not even the nice people who make announcement of their intentions in the *Feudal Times* can be supposed to put to themselves or each other. A brutal philosopher has invited all lovers to consider that the creature whom they are idealising to-day would have been ignored by them if she had been born eighteen years previously.

Adam did not bother his head about what Eve

would look like when she became *passée*. I give their mutual wonder no longer span than that of a modern couple. Perhaps not so long. Nevertheless it may be presumed that the man was glad to have the woman near him in the Garden, on a wet afternoon. She must have made his cave or snugger yet more snug.

The Monday indicated by Jerry found our hero comfortably ensconced in his third-class smoker, facing the engine, no other passengers. *Diana Vanity*, that Galatea brought to complete life by 90,000 blows of the chisel, took demure repose in his bag on the rack. She was ready to go into as many editions on day of publication as her publisher should be prepared to lie about.

Oliver was happy.

The scene with Miss Stebbing and the little Jew lawyer would be interesting, might give rise to a dramatic scene, might even supply the plot for a story.

In any case that damned grocery business would lose no more money. Jerry had got to the bottom of that.

To beguile the journey up he had had a look at the station book-stall. At first glance there was, as usual, nothing exposed for sale which seemed even faintly readable.

His eye wandered hopelessly over the Dells and the Glyns, the Rucks and the earlier, sixpenny Bennetts.

Finally it lighted upon a row of soiled and tattered volumes at 2d. each. Optimistically he chose a pessimistic selection of essays by Schopenhauer. Possibly *Metaphysics of Love* might help him to understand his relationship to Miss Stebbing. This is what he read :

As a matter of fact, love determines nothing less than the establishment of the next generation. The existence and nature of the *dramatis personae* who come on to the scene when we have made our exit have been determined by some frivolous love-affair. As the being, the *existentia* of these future people is conditioned by our instinct of sex in general, so is the nature, the *essentia*, of these same people conditioned by the selection that the individual makes for his satisfaction, that is to say, by love. . . .

The purpose of every man in love, however objective and sublime his admiration may appear to be, is to beget a being of a definite nature, and that this is so, is verified by the fact that it is not mutual love but possession which is the essential. . . .

The real aim of the whole of love's romance, although the persons concerned are unconscious of the fact, is that a particular being may come into the world ; and the way and manner in which it is accomplished is a secondary consideration. However much those of lofty sentiments, and especially those in love, may refute the gross realism of my argument, they are nevertheless in the wrong. . . .

Forty pages of close reasoning convinced Oliver that he and his one-time mistress must each contain the half of an infant crying for the light.

And how, exactly, the eyes of that child, supposing there had been one, would have been opened to truth and honesty by sending Miss Stebbing to prison, was a matter by no means clear to our hero. But perhaps that would not be necessary.

CHAPTER XIII

MISS STEBBING AT BAY

MR. COHEN was all that his name indicates. He was the ordinary little Jew, as easy to recognise as an elephant and as hard to define. You guessed the misery he had brought to countless families, the homes he had broken up at the instigation of the money-lender and the purveyors of furniture on the hire-system.

“Put me in possession of the facts,” he had said, “and you can leave the young woman to me. I know her class. She won’t be difficult to deal with.”

But Mr. Cohen was wrong. Miss Stebbing proved very difficult to deal with, if not impossible. It was apparent as soon as she entered the room and beheld the conclave assembled against her that she knew the game to be up. She turned round and looked towards the door, as though with the intention of making a bolt; but smart Mr. Cohen, anticipating this, had closed the door and was leaning up against it in an unhappy assumption of casualness.

“Good afternoon, Miss Stebbing,” said Oliver, now

extraordinarily ill at ease. He had the acute sense of unfairness which any man must feel who has lured mouse or rat into a contraption of wood and wire. He felt that he had lured this beautiful creature into the equally uncomprehending meshes of the law. Jerry looked business-like, and a trifle officious. Alone Mr. Cohen seemed perfectly happy about himself. Which of his race is ever otherwise ?

“ Good afternoon,” said Miss Stebbing. “ Is it a tea-party ? ”

There are three ways of taking Miss Stebbing’s kind of defeat. The first is denial and in the face of absolute proof. This is the woman’s way. Logic, to a woman, means nothing ; figures, no more than that whoever put them down lied. The second is clamant, vociferous justification. The third is silence—a way of dignity which becomes either sex. Miss Stebbing took the first way.

Mr. Cohen had not opened his thick lips before Oliver knew that there could be no question of a jury and those unnameable horrors in human disguise—wardresses. “ Warders ” may well send a shudder through the strongest frame, but the female of that species. . . . No, there could be no question of prison.

This baulks me. I adore that old-fashioned type of story in which, about three-quarters of the way through, the little court-house is packed, the countryside excited and the judge kindly. Blessings on his

frosty pow and endearing brand of humour ! Alas that my story may contain no such chapter !

“ Miss Stebbing,” said Mr. Cohen, “ I am Feldmann & Lowe, the lawyers, and these gentlemen have called me in to consult me about their books. I find something very wrong in the accounts, and I want your help.”

Miss Stebbing’s face set like clay when the potter has done with it.

“ We had one of those,” she said, “ but the wheel came off.”

And not one helpful word would she utter. In vain Mr. Cohen tried the processes of diplomacy. Miss Stebbing knew nothing, and could explain nothing. There were the books, and those were the amounts which she had handed over in cash. Confronted with the figures given by the bacon-factor, the egg-merchant and the dealer in flour she stuck to her denials. As for the bread-man :

“ All the street knows as Joe Gummett is a liar,” she said. “ A blooming liar. *And* beats his wife.”

Mr. Cohen tried another tack.

“ What’s your Christian name ? ” he asked.

“ Ada.”

Oliver reflected that probably never before had a man been ignorant of his mistress’s name. That was pure Belladonna Road. Anyhow “ Ada ” was nonsense and didn’t fit. Miss Stebbing was Miss Stebbing to everybody. “ Ada ” was a pseudonym

which would have flummoxed the entire neighbourhood.

“ And your address ? ”

This was given.

“ What was your mother’s maiden name ? ”

“ Florence Mary Middleton.”

“ And the name of your mother’s uncle in Ireland who left her the property about which you told Mr. Sheldon ? ”

Miss Stebbing hesitated.

“ Terence Darling.”

“ Where is the property.”

“ Near Belfast.”

“ What is the name of the firm of lawyers from whom you draw your private income ? ”

Miss Stebbing drew herself up.

“ Now, look here, Mr. Judas,” she said, “ let you and me understand one another. Them as asks the least questions’ll be told the least lies ! ”

The allusion to his race appeared to nettle the managing-clerk, who had given the name of the firm and not his own. That was his normal custom, his secret hope being that he might be taken for either young Lowe or young Feldmann. There is a class of persons whose aim in life is to become a junior partner. They needs must love the highest when they see it. But you cannot deceive a girl of Miss Stebbing’s class about a matter of race or social position.

"You don't understand, my girl," retorted Mr. Cohen. "We are not satisfied that there ever was an uncle in Ireland. I am inviting you to reply to my questions. There is another place where you may be forced to answer them."

Miss Stebbing's natural independence got the better of her caution. She lashed out :

"It's no good your talking Big Ben to me, Mr. Judas, or Bow Street either. You're not going to prosecute. Mr. Sheldon's not going to prosecute. Mr. Hanmer won't tell him to neither. What 'ud the old beak say to them for trusting a young girl with all that money? There's other things too. I took the money if you want to know, and I spent it. How I spent it's my affair. I didn't keep any of the dough, and I haven't any now. You can't get nothing out of me. And you can do ex-ac-ly what you like, young man, and mind the step when you go out."

"Of course we're not going to prosecute," Oliver said. "Come, Miss Stebbing! We've been good friends, and we're not going to be bad enemies because of . . . well, because of a mistake. Why not tell us all about it?"

The girl hesitated.

"Take your time," said Oliver, "nobody wants to hurry you."

She drew a long breath.

"All right, I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything,

Mr. Sheldon. Only get rid of 'Is Nibs first. He puts years on me."

This was said jauntily enough, though the girl's lip trembled.

"Perhaps, Mr. Cohen . . ." began Oliver.

"Certainly, sir," the tactful Jew replied. "You can give me a ring later at the office."

He advanced, and put a velvety paw on Miss Stebbing's shoulder.

"You're in good hands, my dear," he said. "You're in the hands of a gentleman. Ninety-nine employers would have sent for the man in blue long before this. Now tell Mr. Sheldon the truth."

Miss Stebbing turned her face away and covered it with her hands. Her shoulders shook.

Jerry accompanied Mr. Cohen downstairs. He did not look at his friend. Let Oliver get out of the mess of his wretched philandering for himself.

"Let's have some tea . . . Ada," he said.

"Don't talk soft," Ada retorted. "It was 'Miss Stebbing' before, when we were—you know. And it's going to be Miss Stebbing now."

"All right, Miss Stebbing. Let's have some of those buttered buns of yours. Tea for two please; we're not going to stop being friends. So powder your nose, and put plenty of butter on the tea-cakes."

Not a brilliant sally, perhaps.

"Come in to-night, Jerry," he shouted downstairs.

I am not going to pretend that either of my characters was in danger of being choked by emotion. Both made a rattling good tea. There was much clatter of cups and some mediocre, helpful joking on Oliver's part. He tried his hardest not to behave like Filmer Jesson in Pinero's play.

As soon as it was obvious that neither of them could possibly eat or drink any more, as soon, that is, as Oliver began to play with his pipe, Miss Stebbing, drawing a pattern on the cloth with her finger, began to speak in a voice which was utterly unemotional.

"Well, Mr. Sheldon," she said, "I'm going to make a clean breast of it. You may as well know truth first as last."

She paused a moment.

"Mother's uncle," she continued, "wasn't called Terence Darling. She never had no uncle so far as I know of."

Oliver nodded.

"I made him up so's to account for always being flush. I knew that old cat next door would have something to say about all the silk stockings I bought off her. They wasn't many, and I wish I'd throttled her with 'em."

"Why didn't you buy your things up West?" Oliver interrupted.

"What time d'you s'pose I get for going up West? Besides, you can't think of everything, and I knew it

must all come out some day. Then there's Dad. Dad's the best man in the world. I'm sorry I spun that yarn about him drinking. Dad's never come home drunk in his natural. That's the truth, same as you read in *John Bull*. Now about the money. I didn't take it all for myself. Only, after a time, when it seemed so easy, I thought I might as well have a bit besides Alice. And then there was that Sparfoot woman, damn her, and Alice's baby, and I had to go on."

Here Miss Stebbing's voice assumed a note of earnestness which Oliver had not heard before.

"You do believe me, Mr. Sheldon, don't you?" she cried.

"Of course, my dear, I believe you, only you haven't told me who Alice is, or the Sparfoot woman, or what Alice's baby has to do with it all."

"I'm coming to that. Alice was my friend. She always was my friend, and always will be. Well, Alice's mother died just when the old woman where Alice was in service snuffed it. She was courting at the time, courting strong. Uniform it was as did it, same as it's done a lot of girls. Strange how a chap who looks fine in khaki can be such a mingy worm in civvies! Well, anyhow, Alice married him. She was that way, you know, and it seemed best. It's a bit in the rotten little cur's favour that he went as far as the registry office. Anyhow she and

her bloke got married, and the baby came soon after."

She stopped, and Oliver had the sense to go on puffing at his pipe.

"When Alice's mother died, on top of the other old girl, as you might say, it meant that her husband had to find a home for her, which didn't suit his lordship nohow. What with Alice losing her looks, and showing and all that, there wasn't any fun in swanking round the town with her, I suppose. Or perhaps Alice had no more wages to take my lord to the pictures with, and that's why he packed up. She hasn't seen him from that day to this."

Miss Stebbing had stopped drawing with her finger on the table-cloth, and now sat with her hands folded in her lap. Oliver realised, with a twinge of conscience, that he was being moved exactly as though he were at a theatre. He could "see" Edith Evans in the part of Miss Stebbing.

"Alice's baby was born soon after you came here," she went on. "I had to look after both her and the kid. There wasn't anybody else, and I couldn't see them starve. In Dobbs' time I couldn't do much for them. John Dobb, he was as mean as a monkey; there wasn't much doing there. However, I managed to scrape a bit here, and pinch a bit there. Yes, I pinched all right, stole if you like. And I don't know as I'm ashamed of it. . . . Well, when you

came along, and I saw how easy it was to do you down, that gave me more courage. It bucked up Alice too. I think it was your being so simple that helped Alice through. A week after Dobbs' gave up I told Alice I could manage the doctor and the nurse all right."

"Is Mrs. Sparfoot the nurse?"

"Wait a bit. Mrs. Sparfoot keeps the house where Alice lodged. It's a boarding establishment, middle-class as you might say, and at first she let Alice have a room and all found for thirty shillings a week. That was at the start. When she found out the way Alice was, she must have two pounds. Then when Alice didn't want to come downstairs to her meals it had to be three. At first she thought it was Alice's husband who sent her the money until one day she rumbled me, blast her! 'Well, my lady,' I s'pose she said to herself, 'if you can pinch three quid a week you can pinch four.' And it's been four quid she's had for the last four months."

"Brute!"

"She's worse than a brute, she's got no conscience at all. Soon as she knew for certain it was me, she stopped dealing at the Co-op, and brought her blooming custom to Dobbs'. Paid up all right the first week. Then she began to say as she'd pay tomorrow, then the next day. Then it was weekly. Then she let the amount run a fortnight, and at last, one day when it had gone three weeks, my lady came

into the shop and said straight out, 'Miss Stebbing, I'm not going to pay for my groceries, *and you know why!* I'll be taking a pound of tea and three pounds of best bacon with me now.' She had a nerve, she had. Well, what could I do? Tell me now, what could I have done? . . . There isn't much more. You know how I took the money and that's where it went. Of course I spent a bit on myself—what girl wouldn't? But I used to put back a lot of what that blasted woman had, out of my own money—your money, I suppose I ought to say."

She paused a moment.

"How much did you ta—have in all, Miss Stebbing?"

"One hundred and thirty-seven pounds. Mrs. Sparfoot's had another sixty, say two hundred altogether. Oh, there's one thing more I've got to tell you. When I saw that it didn't much matter what money I took, I started giving it away out of the till."

"Out of the till?"

"Out of the till. To tramps and such-like. Anybody that was down and out. I can't bear to see poor folk suffer. I've given as much away as a pound a week. Always to people who had nothing. I must be a bit touched, I s'pose. But it didn't seem fair. Them not having a crust, as you might say, and you so much. I'm sorry. But I'm not sorry about Alice. I've seen her through, and it isn't wrong to see any-

body through, whatever people say. I know you're not going to put me in the jug, though it would be fair enough if you did. But if I hadn't seen Alice through, it would have been the streets for her. She was always a bit flighty, but I said to myself, 'No, Ada Stebbing, the streets isn't for Alice if you can stop it.' And I did stop it and she didn't go wrong, though what'll happen to her now, God knows! I don't want to be a—a thief for nothing."

"What's Alice's other name?" asked Oliver.

"Muggridge. He looks that mean out of uniform! Mean and shifty like that Mr. Judas."

There seemed no more to be said.

Oliver told Miss Stebbing that he would let her know what he thought about the whole thing in the morning.

When Jerry came in the evening Oliver retailed all that had passed. When he got to the name and description of Alice's husband, Jerry exclaimed:

"Why, that's young Arch. My friend. The chap I told you I met in Chepstow workhouse."

"Your friend, Jerry?" Oliver cried. "By Jove, it never struck me. Your friend, by all that's damnable!"

"My friend, Noll, by all that's wonderful!"

Like the *raisonneur* in old-fashioned comedy Jerry had quickly formed a plan, which he did not at the moment divulge.

“Of course, Miss Stebbing’s not stopping,” he said.

“Of course not.”

The friends agreed that she should return home and continue to draw her salary for three months.

CHAPTER XIV

SHOWING THAT HONESTY IS NOT ALWAYS THE BEST POLICY

BUT somebody else had a plan, too, besides Jerry, and that somebody was Mr. Louis Cohen. Young Loo Cohen was primarily a lawyer's managing clerk, but he was also anything else in which he could see a profit. And he saw a profit in Miss Stebbing. He saw in that face pretty as pink icing the faultlessly faulty, splendidly null features beloved of the film public. With Solomon Tuchverderber, managing-director of the Tuchverderber Film Company Ltd., he talked Miss Stebbing's liquid eyes and soulful hair far into the night. At half-past two in the morning he had got Sol to the point of asking :

“Vell, vot price an introduction? Ask your vriendt zat she come and eat viz us. If she's as good a looker already as you say, vy, zen ve boom her. That is vy she must eat viz us. Zo. Vat matter if she is a tief. You are a tief, Loo, and I am a tief. We are all tieves. Dat is our cross, but ve make no fuss.”

But Mr. Cohen was not inveigled so easily.

"You break my heart, Loo," Sol cried. "Whenever I ask zat you shall do somezings for me, at vunce you talk percentages!"

He spread out his hands in Judaea's immemorial gesture. But the matter did not prove incapable of adjustment. After some three hours of haggling Mr. Cohen was induced to reveal Miss Stebbing's name and address; and it was agreed that he should act as Sol's ambassador in the first instance.

Miss Stebbing was not too polite to Loo; but what, to that race, is courtesy when weighed in the scale with profit?

"Hello, here's Mr. Judas! Got the handcuffs with you?" had been her greeting as she opened the door in answer to the characteristic Jewish knock, furtive yet peremptory.

But when Mr. Cohen explained that he had come to ask Miss Stebbing to confer a favour upon a friend of his — a gentleman in the film business — that lady grew thoughtful.

"I'll join you at the end of the street," she said. "It's no use letting Dad and Mum into this yet. I'll fix them later."

Over a cup of tea at an adjacent café Miss Stebbing agreed to interview the film-gentleman and sit for a trial "shot." Mr. Cohen explained that his friend was in need of a Mary Queen of Scots, which type of face he,

Loo, had been fortunate enough to recollect was possessed by Miss Stebbing.

He extracted three pounds from his wallet and tendered them.

"What's that for?" she asked, tartly.

"We thought you might have some expenses."

"Three quid's no good to Mary Queen of Scots. No, nor Queen Elizabeth neither! So you can keep your money in your pocket, Mr. Judas. When this child wants dough, she'll ask for it, don't you worry. She's not fretting yet."

There were not, to put it vulgarly, any flies on Miss Stebbing. Beneath that exquisitely simple face a brain worked, active as a maggot. If Mr. Judas had approached her cap in hand it was because she possessed something which he wanted very badly. He would have to pay "according."

Mr. Tuchverderber received Miss Stebbing at his office in Soho like a bear who has been brought up in a soap-factory. He saw at a glance the potentialities of his prey. At once the trio taxied to Golder's Green where a shot or two were taken.

And then lunch was proposed.

"A bun'll do me," said Miss Stebbing, "I'll be back at three o'clock, either here or Greek Street, and you can tell me what my dial looks like."

In vain was a table at the Abracadabra set before Miss Stebbing. She stuck to her bun.

The studio-shots revealed to excited Sol nothing

untoward. Mouth, nose, ears, eyes proved to be the correct size and shape, to be perfectly placed and perfectly related. The sweep of the forehead, the curve of the throat were perfect. From no angle did all that loveliness betray one single damnatory flicker of intelligence. God can be very good to the lower classes.

One of the junior directors had, indeed, ventured to suggest a trial of the girl's acting capabilities.

"Acting capa . . ." screamed Solomon, "viz a face like zat. Don't talk foolishness! We don't vont her to act! She must joost look!"

Upon her return at three o'clock Miss Stebbing was informed that she would do, and that Sol's firm was prepared to give her a trial. Sol then produced something which he called a contract. This proposed to bind Miss Stebbing body and soul to his firm for three years at five pounds a week.

"I hope it keeps fine for you," said Miss Stebbing. "Who d'you think you're kidding? Not this child! Now, listen here. You sent a lawyer to me, now it's my turn. Fair's fair. I'll just send my lawyer to you."

"Vot more you vont, my tear?" whined Solomon.

"What don't I want!" Miss Stebbing retorted.

"Wait and see!"

"Surely the terms are more than generous?" put in Mr. Cohen, "they're handsome."

"Handsome or ugly, I'm not slipping on them

yet," retorted Miss Stebbing. "My grave's not dug."

"Loo, you are one fool," cried Sol. "Vy interrupt zis good girl joost ven she tell us vat she vonts !

"My lawyer will tell you all about that. Now how about the stunt ? "

"Vat stunt, my tear ? "

"My discovery, of course. Who's going to *discover* me ? I'm not blind. You're not doing this for the benefit of my health, or your own either. You think I'll make a hit—you *know* I shall, or you wouldn't risk, what is it, five quid for three years. I know your sort—you wouldn't risk tuppence. No, you think I'm the goods. Very well then, I'll be the goods all right, only you must dress the window according. Am I to be a Duchess in disguise, or what ? "

"There's something in that," mused Mr. Cohen.

It would be unedifying to pursue this conversation further.

Sufficient, perhaps, if I say that on the following Christmas Eve a singularly beautiful girl was found in a fainting condition on the snowy front-door steps of a house in Eaton Gate belonging to Mr. Solomon Tuchverderber, of the Tuchverderber Film Company Ltd. A dinner party was in progress, two of the guests, by a curious chance, being Mr. Eves Dropper of the *Daily Sludge* and Mr. Tittle of the *Evening Blast*. This extraordinarily beautiful girl, these

journals stated next day at two columns' length, was supposed to be a Polish refugee. All that she had been able to whisper on being momentarily restored to consciousness was her name and that of a town.

"Aïda St. Ebbing," she had murmured, then "Cracow." After which she had fainted again. Round her neck was a rope of exquisite pearls, whilst her hand clutched a lace handkerchief in the corner of which was a coronet and the initials "A.St.E."

"Cracow," said the always accurately informed *Evening Blast*, "was, as is well known, the capital of Poland until late in the sixteenth century, when Louis XV, 'le Roi Soleil,' by the Edict of Nantes conferred that dignity upon Warsaw. It has a population of approximately 49,835, though some authorities put it as high as 49,865."

"Seldom, north of the Vistula," wrote the meticulous *Daily Sludge*, "are complexions found of such amazing fairness as that possessed by this blonde and romantic young lady. It is thought that she may be a descendant of the Marquis of St. Ebbw who gained lands and favour at the hands of Henry III during that monarch's campaign against Owen Glendower. Inquiries at Ebbw Vale have elicited the fact that a younger son of the ninth Marquis emigrated to Poland in 1793 and espoused the cause of Kosciusko. The change from Ebbw to Ebbing is explained by

the well-known preference of the Poles for names which are easily pronounceable. The climate is a cold one."

Both journals expressed the opinion that the young lady could not have chosen a more propitious door-step. Mrs. Tuchverderber had received the poor girl with open arms, and had expressed her intention of nursing her frail charge back to health and beauty.

Two months later paragraphs appeared in every gossip column in England, stating that the young lady—"who, our readers will remember, was found," etc., etc.,—had made complete recovery in everything except memory. To Mr. Tuchverderber's great astonishment she had revealed a marvellous aptitude for the registering of screen-emotion. Algernon Gubbidge had seen Aïda, and had been so much struck by her extraordinary beauty and histrionic power that he was writing a special screen-drama for her. The subject chosen was Joan of Arc. Stress would be found to be laid, not so much upon the tragic incidents of the holy maid's career, as upon certain love-passages with Warwick. As that redoubtable Earl, Navarin de Moutonne, the British Guiana film-star, would play "opposite" Miss Aïda St Ebbing. The Tuchverderber Studios at Golder's Green were in full swing, etc., etc.

In the deed-boxes of Messrs. Maclauchlan, Ferguson & Mackenzie—Miss Stebbing, being no fool, knew

the proper counter to a Jewish firm—had reposed, for two months, a document whereby Ada Stebbing agreed, not to put too legal a phraseology upon it, to act such screen parts as the Tuchverderber Film Company Ltd. might assign to her for the space of four years, and during that time to act for no other company. For the first year she was to be paid twenty pounds per week. For the second year, provided the Company exercised its option, she was to receive one hundred pounds per week. For the third, three hundred pounds; and the fourth, five hundred pounds. One day was to count as a year. That is to say that if the Company called upon Miss Stebbing to work upon the first day of January in any year it must continue the contract for the remainder of that year, Miss Stebbing being bound to continue her services. In the case of the company declining to exercise its option, such refusal to be declared on the first of January. In the case of such declaration the contract to become void, and Miss Stebbing to have the right to transfer reputation and talent to some other company.

In any event, John Stebbing her father, and Florence Mary Stebbing his wife were to receive one thousand pounds and the freehold of a cottage near Aberystwyth.

None of the parties had reason to complain. The rise to fame of Aïda St. Ebbing is a part of English history. In four years that lady had put by forty

thousand pounds, whilst over the same period her employers made three-quarters of a million. Mr. Louis Cohen is now a partner in Feldmann & Lowe, and potters round the lanes at Surbiton in a neat little six-cylinder Nebbich.

CHAPTER XV

MR. ODDLE AGAIN DOES BUSINESS

BUT I must not get on too fast.

Jerry's little plan for reconciling—no, that's not the word—for taking his friend "Arch" by the scruff of the neck, pitching him nose forward into his wife's lap and commanding him to love, honour, comfort and keep her—this was not so successful. The difficulty was to find Arch. Discreet inquiries from his cronies elicited a complicated explanation in which the word "toff" was freely mentioned. Arch was "in" again, so much was certain. Rumour put the "stretch" at three years.

"*Wiv* vi'lence, it was, an' they come dahn on 'im crool. Was it eighteen, Bill, or twenty-four?"

"Years?" cried Jerry, horrified.

"Blimey, no, lashes. It was sumfink like dat. Wot's yer bizness wiv 'im any'ow?"

Jerry reflected.

Arch had certainly not been to see him for three months. He still had the lad's post office savings book, and was still paying ten shillings weekly to his account. But there was no happening on him at

the moment. Jerry decided, therefore, to transfer the weekly payment to Alice Muggridge.

Oliver, obstinate after the fashion of all weak men, refused an offer of £400, including stock, which was conveyed to him through the medium of Oddle.

"If you can't manage a gold mine," said that worthy, "a gold mine what's absolootly GENUINE, then you'd best make room for somebody as can."

Oliver disliked the sight of this grampus blowing into his front shop. There must be something *in* the business, he felt, or Oddle wouldn't have deplaced himself.

"Let me see, wot did you give for it? Seven 'undred, if I remember right."

"Eight hundred, Mr. Oddle."

"I knew there was a 'undred in it somewhere. S'pose I get my customer up another fifty? He's a genuine fellow, is my customer. Say five 'undred quid and I'll close the bargain!"

If Oliver had been in any sense a sane man he would have accepted Oddle's offer. His bills were a hundred and forty pounds more than his balance at the Bank. Five hundred pounds, less one hundred and forty, leaves three hundred and sixty. Well, Oliver was obstinate, and his refusal meant one more step on the road at the end of which he came to look back upon that three hundred and sixty pounds as upon a fortune.

He determined to draw two pounds a week out of the business, in place of three.

The next quarter, during which he had himself weighed out the cheese, butter, bacon, etc., showed a net loss of just over fifty pounds ; the following one the loss of seventy.

It was on this fourth stock-taking day, one year exactly after he had commenced petty tradesman, that Oliver enunciated the profound aphorism :

Prostitution soils the body ; groceries befoul the mind.

The following morning saw Oddle again enter his shop. He was, he said, just passing.

"Give you three 'undred pounds for the lot and take over to-morrow ? GENUINE offer," said that worthy.

"Oh, goroo, goroo ! Oh, my lungs and liver, no !" Oliver replied.

"Will you take three-twenty ?"

Now, during the previous six months Oliver had made repeated attempts, in a non-Oddleian direction, to get rid of Dobbs' Stores. These had been completely unsuccessful. Nobody had bid a penny. One or two customers who had looked possible had said that there would doubtless be a more suitable time later on. Everybody seemed to have got wind of his difficulties. For, of course, wholesalers will not wait for ever ; there had been one or two writs, the Bank was none too pleasant. Oliver's balance was reduced to twenty pounds and he owed just one

hundred and forty. Three hundred and twenty less one hundred and twenty left him exactly two hundred pounds—two years of something less than starvation. He made up his mind.

“I’ll take three-fifty, and the buyer pays all commissions ! ”

“What’s the turnover now ? ”

“Round about £60.”

Mr. Oddle cocked his eye at the stock.

“No,” he said, “three-twenty’s my last word.”

Half an hour later he gave Oliver an open cheque for forty pounds and a second one, payable in seven days’ time, for three hundred.

Next morning Henry Dobb walked in. The year at the seaside had done Henry’s eczema a great deal of good. It was now hardly noticeable.

In less than a week the business of transfer was complete, and Oliver found himself on the doorstep with a Bank balance of two hundred pounds, and some seven pounds in cash. As he said good-bye to Dobbs’ Stores, an old man, who had been standing in the gutter, put fiddle to chin and drew from it the first notes of Raff’s *Cavatina*.

Oliver gave him a pound note and bade him go to the devil !

Then he burst into tears.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH COINCIDENCE USES HER LONG ARM

TWO years have elapsed.

Aïda St. Ebbing—there is question no more of the diminishing “Miss”—has seared the eyeballs of every little typist, seamstress and tweeny. She is the talk of drawing-rooms, and the reason why, in the Palaces of Tea and Toast, your order takes so unconscionable a time. Poets have hymned her, fired by Musset’s stanzas à la Malibran. What is more to the point, perhaps, she has drawn first her thousand pounds, and then her five thousand. It is the 4th of January, and she has started to tackle “Florence Nightingale.” “Grace Darling” is to be filmed in the summer, when, presumably the water will be a little warmer. It is too early to make definite forecast for the year following, though it is whispered that Gubbidge has Aïda in mind for the heroine of his *magnum opus* dealing with the life of Mrs. Humphry Ward. The cottage at Aberystwyth has proved entirely delightful. The kitchen-garden in particular is an immense success. Its giant gooseberries provide the Prime Minister, when he is

perorating in the neighbourhood, with a humorous yet patriotic simile.

Aïda's parents drink the champagne which she sends them. They have forgiven her.

What about Oliver ?

Oliver is "down and out." Two hundred pounds will not last your gentleman for an eternity, not even for two years. After leaving the Stores our hero took a moderate apartment at Notting Hill, and drew up a number of regulations for the avoidance of expense. These were concerned with a multitude of things such as never taking a taxi, or when impelled into one by a friend, avoiding offering to pay the fare by being the last to get out. The rules covered the refusal of invitations where servants must be tipped, the frequenting of solitary hostelries where he would not be entrapped into a "round." Does a friend invite him to the theatre he must decline—or bang go many sixpences for programme and cloak-room, a drink in the intervals, and possibly a late chop. Winter underclothing is to be bought at the August sales, summer vests and pants towards the end of December. Meals "outside" are not to be thought of.

Yet with all these precautions rigorously observed, Oliver found that at the end of nine months he had hardly any of that two hundred pounds left.

How often, in the theatre, has not the reader seen some *jeune premier*, cut off with less than a shilling, slap a manly chest and demand to know whether he

cannot earn his own living ? The answer in pre-war days appeared always to be yes. In post-war days the answer is obviously no. The advertisement columns seemed to Oliver to be full of young men who demanded thirty shillings a week in return for their willingness to do shorthand-typing in six languages, plus valeting and acting as chauffeur-gardener. And demanded in vain. Our friend had no trade in his fingers.

The thing which infuriated Oliver most at this period was a series of articles which appeared in *The Plantagenet*. Never had snobbishness appeared so disgusting. Here was a writer who, when half the world was starving, had the stomach to indite a series of columns on polite guzzling. Perhaps "Périgord" was starving, too, and glad of his editor's miserable guineas. "May vultures gripe his guts !" said Oliver on reading how "Périgord" deemed dinner for two persons cheap at £3. 10s. 0d., "though, to be sure, the wines drunk were but the everyday Mersault and, *comme vin de table*, a Pichon-Longueville." Oliver would have savaged the fellow who could write : "The reader of Shelley is not less surprised by the epithet, 'winged,' than we were on finding an otherwise blameless menu prefaced 'Hors d'Œuvres.' Propriety is as much offended here as in the flanking of the caviare with sauce-boats. We cannot blame too severely so undesirable a departure from the strict permissible. The chicken-turbot, chablis-treated and garnished with oysters, mush-

rooms, truffles and slices of milt, admirably prepared the palate for the austerity of woodcock. The sweet which followed brought to an elegiac close a dinner Spartanly composed, it is true, but sufficient in quantity to send us not empty away. The waiter at the *Ventre Doré* spoke, as old Polonius might have said, 'with good accent' and served 'with fair discretion'."

"And yet they wonder," thought Oliver, "and yet they wonder that once in every hundred years the mob gets busy with cord and knife, halter and guillotine."

Sheldon was right. *On y va canaille!* was a high-sounding "Last Post" for the condemned aristocrats of 1789. *Vas-y canaille!* "To the gallows, scum!" is the threat underlying all those post-war meetings in Hyde Park. The epithet has changed sides, that is all.

My hero ought not to have been "down and out." He ought to have found work. Of what use his "advantages" if he failed to turn them to useful purpose? He ought to have done this, that and the other. Agreed, but what precisely? You, reader, see in your morning paper that there are two million unemployed in this country, and then . . . ring for more toast. That is all you do about it. *Leader-writers* on the *Feudal Times* and the *Plantagenet* write comic articles pretending that to stop the dole will mean an increase in the demand for labour.

Walrus-whiskered old Colonels scrawl letters a column long to the effect that what this country wants is not whiners but workers. No capitalist seems able to get it into what passes for his head that when there is not enough work to go round somebody must go workless. Are all capitalists illiterate? I never knew one yet who did not spell workless "workshy." It may be that hanging the capitalist would not greatly improve the condition or prospects of the unemployed. *C'est possible*. But it would at least provide a toothsome spectacle for the hungry, and half a loaf of that sort of consolation goes a long way towards brightening a day without other bread.

Perhaps it would be truer to say that Oliver was "down", but not "out." He managed to scrape along by hanging on to the tails of the literary journals, which supplied him with a certain amount of reviewing amounting to a modest incompetence. He even got some dramatic criticism for the *Daily Sludge*, approximately three inches twice a week. But being paid on space rates—so much a line, reader—this was at all times a precarious source of revenue. Did a West End clubman swallow his gold tooth, away went a whole inch! If a cat, tree'd at Hampstead, could not be saucer-coaxed, bang went the lot! The *Sludge* loved to crowd him out altogether. As for popular journalism, the truth, I am afraid, is that Oliver was too intelligent. Young Hopeful, who enters a correspondence-college as a country bumpkin

and comes out after three weeks the complete journalist, possesses not a brain but a twaddle-tank.

In November Oliver happened on a stroke of luck. The young fellow who lodged immediately beneath him—nobody could lodge above—had dropped a hint that the Tuchverderber Film Company Ltd. were in want of a man to take the place of a poor wretch who, the Company had decided, if he must die of consumption should at least not use their door-step for that purpose.

The job was simply to carry cases containing films from one picture-house to another. It was worth two quid a week. Oliver might do.

In the event Oliver had "done." This employment, humble though it was, eked out by his reviewing, enabled him to keep a roof over his head, to put an occasional meal between his teeth, and to look fairly presentable on the outside. Publishers had got tired of buying his name to garnish their lists, and not one of them would so much as look at *Diana Vanity*. It is utterly useless for a man who has hoisted the sail of the worst-seller to attempt to tack in midstream in the hope of finding best-seller printed on the other side. However hard he may put over the helm, the boom refuses to swing.

On a wet, windy and altogether unpleasant winter evening, as Oliver was crossing the lower end of Shaftesbury Avenue, carrying "The Lady of the

Lamp " from one cinema palace to another, and wool-gathering, a magnificently - geared, extravagantly-cylindereed limousine swept round the corner and caught him. He was extricated in something under seven minutes and was found not to be dead. An old man on the kerbstone did not interrupt his fiddling of Raff's *Cavatina*. In the meantime, from the gorgeous body of the ear had descended Aïda St. Ebbing.

" Crikey ! " she exclaimed, for in moments of excitement Miss Stebbing forgot her Polish accent. " Crikey ! if it ain't Mr. Sheldon."

As the reader knows, Miss Stebbing had a good heart. She would hear no question of hospital, nor would she await the arrival of the police-ambulance which, they told her, would probably not be for another twenty minutes. By Miss Stebbing's orders Oliver was placed in her ear and driven rapidly to the modest flat in Berkeley Square in which Aïda consented to pig it pending the completion of the little house in Park Lane.

Sir Scalpley Winee, summoned from the dinner-table, declared for a broken leg, severe but not irremediable internal injuries, and an assortment of bruises and contusions.

" He'll be in bed for seven weeks, dear lady, and there may be complications."

" I 'ope ze vezzaire keep fine for 'eem, Sir Vinee," said Aïda.

And there, for a much longer period than seven

weeks, we must leave Oliver. Miss Stebbing, I insist, had a good heart. But how good neither she, nor anybody else, could have guessed who did not read the full account of the affair "exclusive to" *The Daily Sludge*, and in the familiar style of Mr. Eves Dropper, now Miss St. Ebbing's publicity agent. By a miraculous stroke of fortune Dropper had been in the car at the time of the accident. Or said that he had. Stress was laid on the fact that the recipient of the film-star's miraculous bounty should have been a humble employé of the Tuchverderber Film Company Ltd.

CHAPTER XVII

A WHIFF OF GRAPESHOT

JUST before the Unemployment Riot of that Black Thursday in February, work had attained the pitch of maximum scarcity, the politicians had proved themselves alike ignorant and incapable, the capitalists selfish, the men sulky. Labour's situation was at its wintriest, and discontent remained unsunned, in spite of the Royal marriage which had taken place some months earlier.

The Ghost of Protection, that old and familiar bogey, once more stalked the land. Nincompoops climbed innumerable platforms and called, if not Heaven, at least the ceiling to witness that a tax on American boots would let the boots in, whereby the country's revenue would benefit, and also keep them out, whereby the native cobbler would increase and multiply, and the song of the last be heard once more on the village-green. The shorter the people's patience, the longer became the politicians' prattle; the scantier the poor folks' rations, the more elaborate Périgord's *menus* in the *Plantagenet*.

Let the reader cast his mind back to that bitter winter evening when a huge and well-led army of unemployed overcame the police, both foot and horse, by sheer weight of numbers. Anybody who wants to be perfectly clear as to "what really happened" on this occasion has only to turn up the newspaper files. The *Feudal Times* will tell him how the police behaved with exemplary patience and the mob with unexampled ferocity, how the constables refused to draw their batons and single-sticks, and chose rather to admonish the crowd with such phrases as "Naughty, naughty rioters, go home, go home!" How these soft words failed to avert wrath, as they proverbially must. How the Riot Act was read. How the fall of Downing Street becoming imminent, the Guards were sent for. How the Officer Commanding, seeing cajolery useless and with tears choking his voice, gave the order to fire. In the *National Conscience* the seeker after truth will read how the starving mass behaved with a restraint unknown in the annals of popular protest. How their leaders implored the constables to betake themselves to their quarters lest they and the pretty gee-gees should get hurt. How the men marched up Whitehall head high and breast-forward, never doubting barriers would break. How, in response to the men's humble prayer that they might be brought face to face with the Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Binks-Boodle, the soldiery had opened fire.

The reader who finds a difficulty in reconciling these two impartial accounts has a simpler task if he do but bethink him of the *Daily Sludge*. That astute journal declared itself "a supporter of authority now, henceforth and forevermore, and, we may add, in the future." Its next morning's leading article was headed "Hooligans, to Heel!" and though wanting in grammar did not lack the blood-lust of the last-ditcher. At the same time it called attention to the fact that a subscription-list on behalf of the killed and wounded would be found in another column, editorially opened to the tune of one hundred guineas.

The atmosphere throughout London on that day was what is known to the self-respecting journalist as "electrical." It certainly affected Archie Muggridge who, discharged and exhorted to a better life, and dogged by the police in the event of his getting an honest job and so putting precept into practice, found himself turning over an old letter for the thousandth time. It was addressed to Mrs. Laurie, and had formed part of the incriminating bundle which Arch had surrendered to Jerry. Not for nothing had Arch listened, as a tiny boy, to some Sunday-school sermon on the two-stringedness of bows. He had abstracted the letter before parting with his booty, and hidden it under a loose board in Mrs. Blackadder's fifth-floor back. He had looked upon it very much as the man of business regards an endowment policy repayable at sixty-five. He had

never meant to use it except in case of dire necessity. Still, he knew where it was, and in that knowledge had felt safer. When "trouble" came upon Arch, he had not worried about his "policy." The board, though loose, "took a bit of moving." Besides, was it not under the bed, where, for two years to his knowledge no broom had penetrated? Nor would penetrate: he knew Mrs. Blackadder. When he came out a certain amount of diplomacy had been required to gain possession of his old room. Fortunately obstacles, as we know, exist only to be conquered, and after a fortnight of threats and moral suasion an old gentleman of eighty-three was successfully turned out. The *cache* proved to be unrifled, and the treasure safe.

On this bitter February evening Arch leaned against the railings at the juncture of the Edgware and Bayswater Roads. His back had been healed these three years past, but the soreness of spirit remained. Why shouldn't he do a bit of 'blacking'?

"Old soldiers, fly barstards!" he kept saying to himself, over and over again, "Old soldiers, fly barstards!"

The atmosphere, as I say, had been "electrical" all day. It had been electrical when, at four o'clock that afternoon, unwashed and breakfastless, Arch had decided to begin his day's work. He had been out of luck lately, had had few jobs, had eaten little, and owed more than two weeks' rent. All these and

something of the "electricity" it was which had made him draw the letter from its hiding-place and, without definite intent, put it in his pocket. He sallied forth, and knew as he sniffed the too solid, tasty, fog-laden air that mischief, in the person of himself and his kind, was afoot.

"Why shouldn't she pay up?" he reflected. "She can afford it, b' Christ!"

He shuffled along.

I do not think that you could dignify by the name of a campaign the succession of thoughts which filtered through this starved brain. They hardly amounted to a plan.

P'raps his luck might not be in. P'raps she wasn't living with 'er husband. P'raps she had give 'erself away, and 'er old man had done 'er in. Serve 'er right! P'rap he had bashed 'er, and she had run orf to the other bloke who wouldn't have 'er now any more than he would afore. P'raps she had gone on the streets. Serve 'er right, again. She always was a "pross." S'posc they'd gone on same as usual, only moved to another address? S'pose Jerry wasn't there any more? That would be orlright in one way, since the coast would be clearer. He was glad he hadn't had any dough out of Jerry these two years past. Jerry was a real torf, not like those other posh blokes. Would the chap on the door pass him? What should he say when he got in? How was he going to draw, and make sure of

keeping the letter cushy for another time? How much should he ask for? 'Undred quid? She wouldn't 'ave all that on 'er, like as not, and she couldn't very well ask 'er old man. Besides, he mightn't have it on him, neither. Wallets, he knew from experience, were thinner than they used to be. He wished Jerry was there to advise. Why the 'ell hadn't Jerry advised him right the time before? It would have saved him that last stretch and all. Set him up with a barrer, two, three, ten, twenty barrers, a small pub, p'raps. Should he ask for the woman and insist on seeing her? Shove past the bloke. No. "Creating" wasn't his game. It would be five o'clock when he got there. Better hang about and catch 'er when she come in from 'er tea-partying. And if she didn't come in? Hanging about was dangerous these days. Too many cops. Besides what should he say he was doing? Well, he must chance that. 'Arf an hour would be safe enough to-night, p'raps. If he didn't catch 'er then, 'arf an hour to-morrer morning when she come in from shopping. One o'clock. He knew something of the ways of toffs. . . .

Archie Muggridge took up his stand within a hundred yards of the house, and on the opposite side of the street, so as to get a better view. There was a policeman about the same distance past the house. He was standing still, and not looking Archie's way. It was getting dusk, and the fog was still thick. The

copper might not rumble him. Perhaps his beat was the other way.

Ten minutes passed, then twenty, and still no sign of his victim. The policeman had moved on. It would be a fiction to pretend that Arch was colder and more hungry. There are no comparative states in persons of his condition.

The door opened, and Jerry came down the steps, whistling. So it was all right: she was still there. Arch knew whistling to be a sign that Jerry was in a good temper. What he could not know was the cause of complacency; and indeed, if you had told him that the cause was no less a person than Bishop Berkeley you would not have enlightened him appreciably. Ransacking Mr. Laurie's library for wisdom to put into Mr. Laurie's mouth, Jerry had stumbled upon the divine's *Querist* of 1735. The volume had opened, of itself, at Query No. 354: "Whether, in such a soil as ours, if there was industry, there could be want?"—This had formed the basis of a speech which Jerry felt instinctively would rouse the *Feudal Times* to maximum ecstasy. The Tories, that paper would declare, had found a new slogan.

Jerry was on his way, whistling, to announce his discovery to his patron, who was to speak at eleven o'clock that night on the new Unemployment Bill. As he approached, Arch bent down and pretended to fasten his shoe-lace. When Jerry had safely passed he

took up a position still nearer the house. It was now time to decide upon some definite plan. Thinking on this, he did not hear Jerry's returning footsteps.

"Better let the old man have a squint at Berkeley for himself," had prompted the secretary to return for the volume.

This time Jerry recognised that furtive shoulder and criminal back. Noiselessly he crept up and put both hands over Arch's eyes.

"I ain't done nuthin' ! Swear to Gawd I ain't done nuthin' !" the boy whined. He wrenched himself free, and began to tremble like a colt at its first handling.

"Yes, you have, Arch," said Jerry. "You've done a lot that ain't right. For instance, you haven't been to see me."

"I was jus' goin' to call on yer, Jerry. Strite, I was."

"That's a lie !"

Arch blustered.

"But now you are here, you're coming in."

There is something, after all, in the mastery of mind over matter. Only a very little mind will do, and I have not pretended that Jerry was extravagantly endowed. Arch may be described as almost pure matter—plus a certain capacity for affection which, thwarted, could accomplish extremes of rancour, encouraged, ran to submission the length of a South

American river. His attitude towards Jerry had all the humility of a dog.

Installed in an arm-chair by a good fire, warmed by tea with a liberal encouragement of whisky, fortified by three parts of a tin of tongue and half a loaf of bread, Arch felt his blackguard's courage slipping away. The meal had progressed to the accompaniment of a calculated gabble from Jerry.

"Fags, Arch? Catch. Now tell me about yourself, and why you haven't been to see me before. Couldn't, I suppose?"

"Yer can't pay no blinkin' arternoon calls where I bin."

"No, I suppose not." Jerry moved over to his visitor, and put an arm casually on his shoulder. "All right, again?" he asked.

The boy nodded, and his shoulder-blades made defensive movement through his thin jacket.

"Shut up abaht that!"

There was a pause.

"Now tell me, Arch, what were you really hanging about for?"

"Fer 'er!"

"I thought so. Didn't you give me all the letters?" Jerry's mind had been busy despite the chatter.

"Ow d'yer come to tumble all that quick?"

"Give it to me!"

"Wot 'opes! I were a blinkin' fool larst time, Jerry, but yer don't cop me agyne wiv yer bleedin'

snivel. She's goin' frew it. I've gorn frew it. Nah, it's 'er turn ! ”

“ Give it to me.”

“ Not likely ! ”

“ Give that letter to me ! Put it on the table. I give you my word, Arch, you shall have it back again when you want it. I won't destroy anything.”

Archie put the letter on the table.

“ Is that all ? ”

“ Yus, damn yer. D'yer fink I've got a trunk full on 'em ? There it is. That's the lot. Nah den, wot's the gyme ? ”

“ No game at all, Arch, only this. Those letters aren't the slightest bit of use. You see, you haven't any power over Mrs. Laurie. She's nothing to be frightened of. Her old man knows all about her.”

“ All about 'er and that bloke ? ”

“ All about that bloke. And by the way, that bloke's in China. There have been others, and he knows about those blokes too.”

“ An' 'e knows all that, an doesn't scrag 'er ? ”

“ It amuses him. You don't understand the upper classes, Arch. With them marriage is perfect licence.”

“ She's an 'ore, that's wot I unnerstan'. . . . An' 'e's a 'ell of a soight wus.”

Archie was genuinely shocked.

“ Now let me give you a word of advice, Arch. You're my friend, and you've got to take it. Burn

that letter. You've come here on a wrong stunt, and one that can easily end in—well, it might end in three more years. Blackmail's out of fashion, and the judges don't like it. You can't touch Mrs. Laurie, but Mr. Laurie can get you. *And* me. Don't forget I'm his secretary.

"I mus' see 'er."

"No good, Arch. Mrs. Laurie is at Brighton, and we're all off to Egypt on Tuesday. So put it in the fire."

A pause.

"Or let me. Come, Archie, what d'you say?"

Archie said a good deal which I forbear to reproduce. Half an hour later he took another fag which Jerry proffered, twisted the letter into a spill, and very deliberately applied it first to the fire and then to his cigarette. He watched the paper burn till his fingers held nothing more than an indecipherable half-inch. He threw this on to the flames and watched the ash drift up the chimney.

"Blarst it," he said, "there goes a blinkin' fortune."

"It was gone long ago, Arch; and perhaps it was never really there."

"Talk er sumfink else, fer Christ's sake."

"I *will* talk about something else. I've no money for you, Arch."

"Who arst yer fer money?"

"And the reason why I haven't got any"—Jerry

spoke slowly and stressed each word—"is because I've been giving it to your wife."

Arch received with perfect calm what should have been an astonishing piece of information. It is only the people with highly-developed nervous systems whom you can knock down with a feather. If his marble namesake had collapsed in front of Arch that imperturbable youth would, like as not, have gone no further in ejaculation than "Blimey"!

"The missus? W'ere the 'ell 'd yer pick 'er up?"

Jerry told his friend as much of the Stebbing-Alice incident as he judged it good for him to know, touched little on the moral question of the husband's desertion, not at all on the father's responsibility, and ended on a note of frank congratulation.

"So, as soon as Miss St. Ebbing wanted a lady's-maid, she sent for your wife. You're a lucky devil, Arch. You've got a better half who is in a much better position to look after you than you are to look after her."

There was a look on Arch's face which showed that this side of the matter had not escaped him.

"Then you've a fine, bouncing boy."

"Little b——! I'd like to see 'im. An' 'er, too," he added.

"You'd *like* to see them? You've *got* to see them. But not till you're rigged out."

"Watcher mean?"

"We're going down the Strand, Sonny. This style four guineas ! With roll collar five guineas ! Best of workmanship and material. Fit guaranteed. We'll buy a shirt and a pair of boots, and all that sort of thing, and then Mr. Archibald Muggridge will call on his missus and tell her that he's going to be a better boy from this time on. And a better husband too."

"P'raps she won't . . ." Archie began hesitatingly.

"P'raps my elbow ! Where there's a woman there's a way. It's up to you to find that way, Arch, and you can't do it in those things. Let's get the new ones and burn the old, and the old past with 'em,—not that I want to preach, young feller my lad."

One of the charming things about the poorer classes is that they extend to good fortune as to bad the same stoical indifference.

When the sergeant-in-waiting entered Room G2 at Wellington Barracks shouting, "Get dressed No. 3 Company, fighting order, get downstairs sharp, and fall in !" Guardsman Blundell was sitting on his bed, poshing up in readiness to meet—not his lawful "missus," the housemaid who, the reader will remember, lives in Buckingham Gate—but a young lady more amenable, encountered the previous evening. Blundell's thoughts, so rudely broken in upon by the sergeant, ran not at all upon the rights of man

which it was now his imminent duty to trample under foot.

"Shan't be able to meet that scrag, blarst it," is a convenient summary.

"Quids in! No guard order to-morrer," said Guardsman Baker, his mucking-in chum.

"My bloody rifle sling's gorn west," shouted one.

"Wish I 'ad the b—— who's pinched my pull-through!"

"War's broke out agyne. Roll on my three!"

"Dear Mother, sell the pig and buy me aht!"

"Pig's dead, money gone, soldier on!"

"W'ere is it this time? Brum?"

"'Ope to Christ it is, our old girl lives there."

"W'ere the 'ell's my pouch?"

The sergeant put in his head:

"Get a move on, there, or I'll put yer somew'ere w'ere the birds won't mess on yer!"

When the men fell in Blundell was still thinking about his scrag. He took his "ammo" mechanically just as, half an hour later when the order—"Five rounds-lying-load!"—was given, he lay down mechanically on his belly, loaded, and on the command—"Fire!"—shot and killed Archie Muggridge.

The two friends had been caught in a flurry of humanity at the top of Whitehall, and dragged willy-nilly into the rioting as nations are dragged into the noblest wars. It will never be known whether there was real need for shooting. My own view is that

Literature was to blame. Or shall I throw the onus upon the War Office, which had so far forgotten its tradition as to confer high rank upon a man with literary tastes? If Colonel Webb-Anstruther,—“Piggy,” to his intimates—had not, on the previous evening, dipped into his Carlyle, if he had never heard of the “whiff of grapeshot,” if some recollection of “Now, however, the time is come, and the man,” had not inflamed him to emulation, Archie Muggridge might have been alive to-day. . . .

They carried him down a side-street, laid him on the pavement and made him “as comfortable as possible.” He was shot through the stomach. Jerry, kneeling, supported his friend’s head with his left arm, whilst with his hand he made effort to stay that dark trickle. The story of the Dutch boy and the dyke filled his mind. Archie was dying, and he must think of that old tale! One or two gave advice.

After a time Arch half-opened his eyes and began to babble of mean streets, of something that hurt unbearably. God! how many more? God! God! Then—Oh, the swine! the bleedin’ swine! And something of Alice and not messing her about.

He closed his eyes again.

The riot, Time, Archie himself fell out of Jerry’s consciousness. This blood must be stopped. It was escaping between his fingers. It must be stopped. *It must be stopped. Be stopped. . . .*

It seemed to him that somewhere, some fool was

singing. He couldn't do it with that noise going on. Didn't the fool know that this was no time for singing? The blood must be stopped. . . .

Then he knew that the voice was Archie's. Silly little blighter! Why didn't he shut up! Didn't he know that he hadn't any strength to waste? Jerry jerked his supporting arm slightly.

"Don't, Arch!"

But Arch went on, singing out of the past:

"Abide wiv me; fast faws de eventide;
Ther darkness deepens; Lord wiv me abide;
When uvver 'elpers file, and comforts flee,
'Elp of de 'elpless, O abide wiv me."

"Don't Arch!"

"Swift to its close ebbs aht life's little d'y;
Urf's joys grow dim, it's glories fide awy;"

The boy struggled out of the crook of Jerry's arm, and sat bolt upright.

"Old soldiers never die," he shouted. "Old soldiers, fly barstards!"

Presently a straggler from the riot limped past. He looked incuriously, spat without meaning, and said:

"Dead, ain't 'e, mate?"

Jerry nodded.

"Blimey! 'E didn't fink ter meet Jesus w'en 'e come aht ternight!"

CHAPTER XVIII

FAIR HAVEN

THE luncheon party had been an enormous success. The table decorations were no more than a single bronze from old Japan.

Mischievously Oliver had taken his *menu* from the *Plantagenet*, unjustly execrated in the days of his poverty. Slices of smoked salmon, whose blush would have delighted a Titian or a Monticelli, thinly veiled a piece of admirable Spode, and were kept in countenance by a mushroom flawn. Oysters and caviare waited upon more vulgar taste. Eggs flushed with asparagus points preceded sweet-breads broiled with distinction. The Pauillac was worthy of its reputation. A crumb of excellent Stilton brought the meal to a modest close.

The debate over the matter of the wines had been a long one. Unable to decide between a Pouilly which, though inexpensive, would not have been out of place at any table, and a Mersault, admirable though of doubtful provenance, Oliver had in the end plumped for a Montrachet. For the claret,

Latour and Haut Brion were too high-sounding, and Pontet Canet was too "literary" a wine. Finally Rauzan-Ségla (1900), though undeniably belonging to the second growths, was chosen. Oliver decided against the easy enchantment of champagne. The cognac was august.

The occasion was the issue of the tenth edition, in something over six months, of that world-seller *Diana Vanity*. The guests of honour were Aïda St. Ebbing, Viola Duchess of Willesden, and—the discourtesy to the other *invités* had been frankly waived—Solomon Tuchverderber. Next to Aïda Oliver placed young Lord Harlesden, who had brought his mother under threat of filial displeasure. Tittle whispered to everybody that Harlesden and Aïda were to make a match of it. Lower down Jane Poitiers, Begonia Gumm, the art critic, "Mirandolina" of the *Daily Sludge*, Tittle, Dropper—*enfin* all that world which is so ready to acclaim success. Even Wimpole Reredos had torn himself away from the bedside of a dying Archbishop. Old Stingo, of Stingo & Dillwater, the publishers of *Diana Vanity*, and Jerry, returned that day from Egypt, completed the party.

The room was furnished with the costliest simplicity. Here a first edition of *Emma*, there a signed *Ulysses*. Degas over the mantelpiece quarrelled with Picasso over the sideboard. Epstein sulked in a corner.

"Ouf!" said Oliver, when Eves Dropper, the last

of the guests except Jerry, had taken his chattering departure. "Ouf! I thought that rubbish was never going. Chuck your cigar away, Jerry, and put on the old pipe. How's the Laurie woman?"

"Bored with Tut. Mummies aren't her line by the devil of a long chalk."

"No?"

"No. But tell me about all this."

He waved his arm.

"You're a rotten letter writer. What does it all mean?"

"Sixty thousand quid!"

"Rubbish."

"Not rubbish. Golden sovereigns. At least Bradbury's. Sixty thousand of 'em. Not fifty-nine. Sixty. Sixty thousand jimmyo'-bloomin'-goblins."

"All from *Diana Vanity*?"

"Every blinkin' one, bless 'er little 'eart! Ten editions. That's this country alone. And now America's got her, and Australia's beginning to catch the fever. I sold the dramatic rights for a big lump. At first I thought I should have to let Miss Stebbing have the film-rights pretty cheap, but she said no. Go halves, she said, and make old Tuchverderber stump up! She got an extra fifteen thousand for herself, in addition to her screw, and twenty for me. We tried for forty, but the old fox wouldn't go beyond thirty-five. Told her she couldn't play Diana for any other firm, under her contract."

"Yes, but how do you account for it all? I've read the thing. It's not *very* good, Noll, is it? Of course, I didn't know it was by you."

"My dear boy, it's just muck. Muck and balderdash, fifty-fifty."

"But you always said that you can't *depend* on muck succeeding? There must be some other reason?"

"Haven't you heard? My dear boy, when Miss Stebbing's chauffeur had the sense to run over me, I had the sense to have the MS. in my pocket. I was going to try a publisher with it. Had to make some money somehow. Well, my illness was a long job. Nothing broken, but all squeezed up inside. One day Miss Stebbing, who was, I think, getting the wee-est bit fed up with her nursing stunt—her public was ready for a new one, you know—happened to see the thing lying about my room. So she just nipped round to Stingo's with it, and fixed it all up. Took the contract to her lawyers—Machlauchlan, Ferguson & Mackenzie—just to see that old Stingo didn't diddle her."

"Still, I don't see——"

"No, you old owl, of course you don't. But Miss Stebbing saw. So did Dropper. So did old Stingo. *They* saw that a novel written by a starving devil who has had the luck to be run over by an Aïda St Ebbing must be a masterpiece. Dropper saw to that!"

"Well, and——?"

“ There’s no ‘ Well, and—— ? ’ That’s all. I’m a genius. I’m famous. I’m rich ! ”

“ And how about the other books ? ”

“ To hell with them ! Old Stingo knew it wasn’t any good boosting a man who had had his shot and failed. That’s why *Diana Vanity* is the first work of Roger Gauntlet. ‘ Gauntlet throws a Glove ’ was Dropper’s first headline. The article was a smasher. It challenged English Letters to pick up the glove. The book went like a house on fire for three months and then, quite unaccountably, the sales fell off. They died away to almost nothing. And then Miss Stebbing had a brain-wave. She mentioned the book casually to Old Meg.”

“ Who’s she ? ”

“ It’s not a she. It’s a he. Old Meg is Dropper’s boss and the proprietor of *The Daily Sludge*. Thinks he’s It, with God ‘ his symbol and vicegerent.’ Mad, you know, mad as a hatter. Megalomania. That’s why they call him ‘ Old Meg.’ Well, one night when Miss Stebbing was dining with Old Meg she got on to him about the futility of the Press. Said that the *Daily Sludge* couldn’t knock ‘ ze skin off ze milk-pudding.’ That nettled Old Meg, who had a dozen reporters under boosting orders within the half-hour. Every day for three weeks the *Sludge* had a column about the book. ‘ I’ll show ’em ! ’ said Old Meg. And he did. And I’m worth sixty thousand ! ”

Oliver was silent a moment.

“And now, Jerry, I’ve a confession to make. As a highbrow I was a failure. Let’s be quite clear about that. As a highbrow I failed, for the simple reason that I *wasn’t any good*. I had no *real* talent. I was no better than a Jew without money to lend. As a second Charles Garbage I’m immense ! I’m colossal ! I’m a world-shaker ! Hold me in, Jerry, or I’ll burst ! ”

“You’ve been splashing it round a bit, haven’t you ? ” asked Jerry. “This room’s a bit too posh for my old Noll.”

“This isn’t your old Noll’s idea of a room, fat-head ! This flat, and everything in it—from the Epstein to the notepaper, including the Clarges Sheet address—is simply to startle the bourgeois. ‘I gloat ! Hear me !’ I ordered it *en bloc* from ‘The House Beautiful.’ Here’s five thousand quid, I said, and let’s see what you can do in the way of—what does Balzac call it ?—*luxe insolent*. Luxury which should be an insult—that’s what I wanted, and that’s what I’ve got. Talk about *startling* the bourgeois. That’s not enough. I wanted to crush ’em. I wanted my revenge ! ”

“But, my dear old son, you’ve only got sixty thousand.”

“Only ? Hear him ! ”

“And that’ll go in no time at this rate. Duchesses and all that sort of rot ! ”

“My dear Jerry, Duchesses are the best possible

advertisement. They're trash, but they pay. Look at Wimpole Reredos. Wimpole wallows in 'em, and look how he sells! Besides, I'm only beginning. Before I've done, it'll be sixty thousand a year. Or thereabouts, and thereabouts'll do. So that's that. Leave your brandy. It's expensive, but it's filth, like the people we had to lunch. The car's outside, so come along home. I've got some beer."

"What d'you mean by 'home'? Don't you live here?"

"And be familiar with all that muck? By God, no! This is my show-place. I live at Dobb's Stores, 319, Belladonna Road. Henry Dobb didn't want the flat. So I took all the upper part from him, and went back over the shop. You remember Guardsman Blundell? Well he'd done his twelve, and married his housemaid, so I got them to look after me. It's a bit of a squeeze for room, but we manage all right. After a bit I bought Henry out, and turned the Stores over to Blundell. They've got a couple of decent assistants, and have time to give an eye to me as well. It's rather jolly. Coming?"

"Righto," said Jerry.

"Oh, and there's one other thing. I want a secretary. D'you know of anybody?"

"To dictate to?"

"No, you silly chump! I've got a young woman for that. She comes in every morning. Quite

competent she is, and helps me out with my dialogue."

"Then what d'you want another secretary for?"

"To help me write out my cheques, you dear fool!"

"I shall be damned expensive, old boy!"

"And damned lazy, if I know anything about you.

Is it on?"

"I shall want bags of wages, and two nights a week out. How about followers?"

"The more the merrier. Is it on?"

"No."

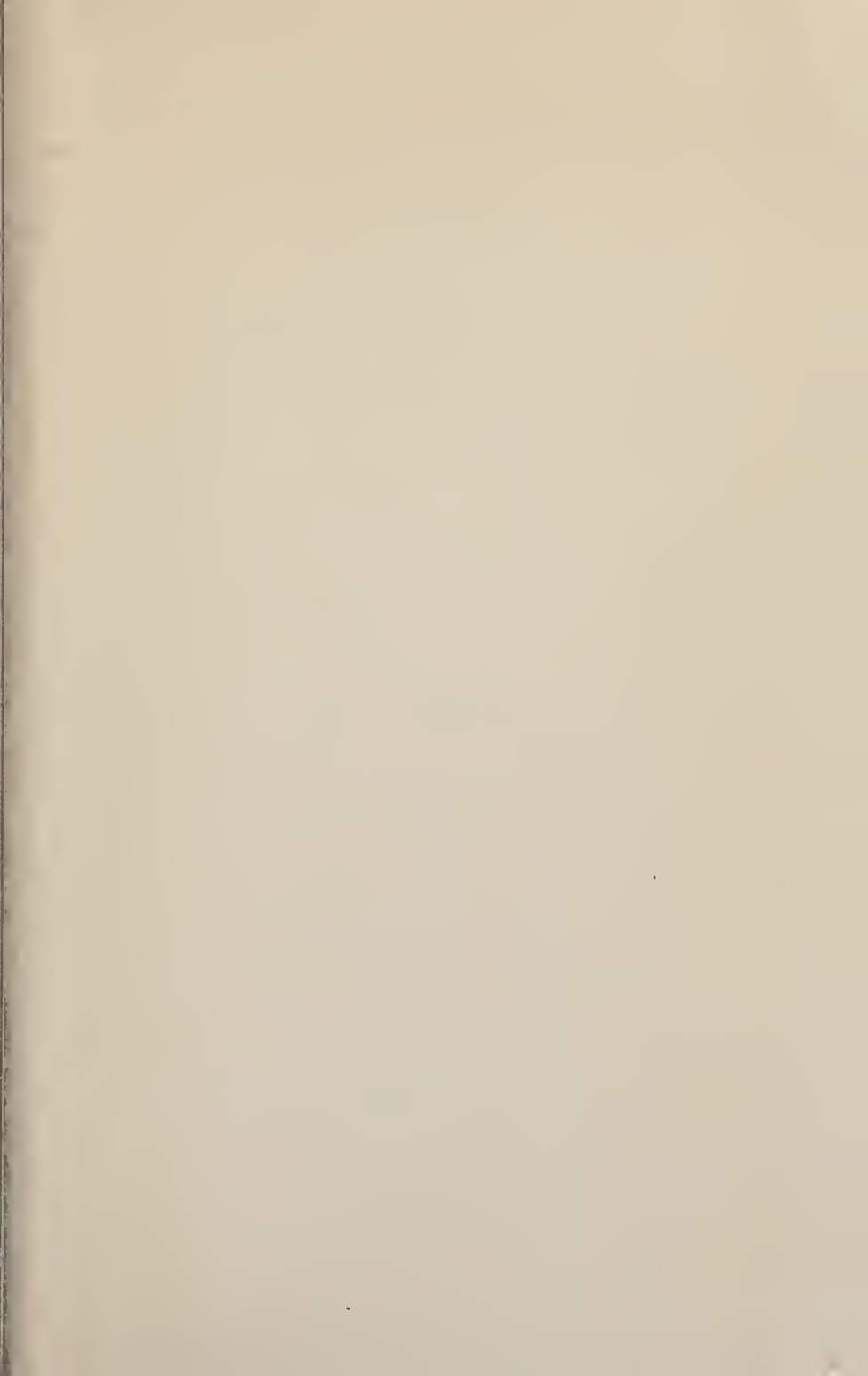
"Jerry," said Oliver slowly, "d'you remember how you 'fell against de wall'?"

His friend nodded.

"Well, this time you've fallen against the Mint. And the Mint is jolly well going to prop you up. It can afford to. Is it a bargain! I shan't ask you again."

"Oui."

They went downstairs, jabbering like a pair of schoolboys.



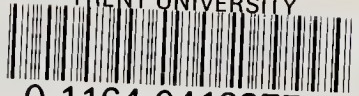
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